

Play Beyond Flow:  
A Theory of Avant-garde Videogames

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## PREFACE: UNTANGLING TERMS

### Why the “Avant-garde”?

The theory and practice of avant-garde art and events in the 20th century can help us understand and appreciate certain videogame theories and practices in the 21st century. Why the avant-garde? Why now? We can learn a lot about where we are, and where we are going, if we compare and contrast the theories and practices of certain videogames with those of contemporary tactical media, the Critical Art Ensemble, net art of the 90s, cyborg art, video art of the 60s and 70s, Fluxus, the Situationists, Pollock, Brecht, Dada, the Futurists, Russian Formalists, Manet, the Impressionists—to trace a history. Videogames advance and change the historical avant-garde project by transforming or opposing gamer culture, moving ahead of the game community, politicizing videogames, or creating what the industry will not, or could not, create. The status quo it challenges is also academic. Avant-garde games question the growing academic canon in undergraduate and graduate programs teaching students that a good game is predicated on good game design.

For readers familiar with art history, but not contemporary new media figures who include themselves within the “avant-garde” and who rework the historical concept in new ways, such as Orlan or the Critical Art Ensemble, it may seem ignorant to suggest that anything having to do with videogames could be comparable to the avant-garde. On the other hand, for those partial to the game community it may seem presumptuous to think that avant-garde actions of The Yes Men (contemporarily), or a Duchamp urinal (a century ago), or Stan Brakhage’s hand-painted films (decades ago), could be helpful in understanding videogames. Different kinds of elitism inform both reactions, a subject I address throughout this

dissertation. The comparison is not novel, in any case. The term “avant-garde games” is becoming current at game conferences. Developers use it to distinguish edgy products from derivative, mainstream products. This shouldn’t surprise us. Marketing departments and government agencies have used the term since the 1960s. Using the term as a way to frame and understand certain videogames is contested among communities who are familiar with both the historical avant-garde and contemporary videogames. The avant-garde was a common subject in the 2010 Art History of Games symposium in Atlanta, where academics advanced it as a viable way to frame certain videogame projects and events, on the one hand, or criticized as an unnecessary anachronism, on the other hand. The aim of this research is to provide a framework with which to think about, create, and critique avant-garde videogames and game events.

The central challenge to this research is that there is not one avant-garde but many. The term “avant-garde” points to many people and many kinds of work and events that span continents, decades, and technologies. It describes a range of artistic practices occurring at certain times and places throughout the last century and a half. It consists of a diversity of theories about many different artists—artists who usually reject the “artist” moniker, and that what they are doing is even art. This is the source of much debate even with the critical art community, and the confusion only gets worse the less we familiar we are with the contemporary or historical avant-garde of other fields.

Uses of the term “avant-garde” to describe certain videogames vary wildly. An article in *Wired* magazine in March of 2007 was entitled: “Latest French Avant Garde: Games,”<sup>1</sup> relaying that the French government had decided to support the national game industry with tax-breaks and induct three game designers into the

*Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. In this case “avant-garde” means commercial boon, signifying art “worthy of state support.” This grates against most conceptions of “avant-garde,” but historically, it might remind us of Napoleon III supporting Manet and the other artists which were rejected into the official Salon. Napoleon saw the avant-garde as a means to expand markets and the middle class while enriching the layered ground of national art. In the article “Are Games Art? (Here We Go Again...)” at Gamasutra.com, a website for folks in game development, Bryan Ochalia says that Peter Molyneux is “no stranger to avant garde games (it’s certainly an apt description of some of his creations, like Populous and Black & White).”<sup>2</sup> In this case, the term means innovation, perhaps disruptive innovation akin to a “black swan.” Meanwhile, the web site for the International Mobile Gaming Awards announced the 2006 winners of “games using all the features of the new generation of mobile devices,” noting that “these avant-garde games...are paving the way for tomorrow’s mobile entertainment.”<sup>3</sup> In this case, it means advanced guard, apparently “advancing” the market rather than culture, certain politics, or form.

Popular culture is aware of the avant-garde, as is academia, but a comprehensive awareness is lacking. Avant-garde movements, figures and catchphrases are cherry-picked to advance immediate rhetorical needs. Or, they are used as a negative comparison to denounce anomalous games as desperate or antiquated. By relating the historical avant-garde, and other contemporary avant-gardes, to videogame practices, theories, figures, and events, we may see how they are realizing and changing the avant-garde to adapt to their own worlds, technologies, agendas, and interests. We can evaluate work or events that are derided by the mainstream game community, or ignored by the academic



community. *Edge*, a high-end game magazine, ridicules *Braid* and *Passage*, two avant-garde works, examined later, for being too reflexive and self-important:

When *Braid* comes attached to a verbal narrative that is so self-consciously inchoate so knowingly indirect in its attachment to the actual gameplay, it's as if a big neon sign has lit up: 'Pay me heed, for I am art!' Similarly, Jason Rohrer's game, *Passage*, by virtue of being entirely unenjoyable as an actual game, is transparently a didactic experience about the transience of life. [...] this is, self-important and condescending.<sup>4</sup>

*Braid* and *Passage* did eventually receive recognition from the videogame community because of critical support from players and academics who were open and willing to engage them. These two games are fascinating examples because they live along the edge of mainstream sensibilities and tastes. They do "pave the way for tomorrow's entertainment." They are conventional enough to orient players into the familiar flow of game experiences. Yet, they are also strange enough to excite and challenge those conventions. What about games that manipulate and rework the medium even more than *Braid* or *Passage*? One goal of this research is to establish a framework that affords multiple perspectives and various criteria to evaluate such work, when it fails to win critical acclaim, and when it fails to generate profits.



Figure 0-1 *Babycastles*, a rotating arcade show of DIY art games in New York's Silent Barn music venue/gallery, spreads local roots of an open and indie game scene.

Artists have been bending, breaking, and unworking the cultural frame of videogames for some time now, especially online. Anne-Marie Schleiner curated a landmark exhibition online in July 1999, entitled, *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art*. Schleiner says that she “thought more people would have exposure through the Internet” than if the game artworks “were installed in a local gallery in one location.”<sup>5</sup> The indie DIY game art scene is increasingly cropping up in more “traditional” art spaces, such as *Babycastles* in the music venue/gallery, Silent Barn in New York, a permanent, rotating show that explores the plasticity of videogames well beyond its familiar cultural frame. The low-key nature, and openness toward what videogames are, and what they could be, in these venues strongly contrasts the aggregate rating systems that we are used to in gamer culture.

Marc Doyle runs Metacritic.com, a website that tracks magazine and online reviews of videogames and compiles them into a single meta-rating system. Ranking websites like this wield incredible power over the game industry, even more so than critical reviews in the film industry. After a release, executives and producers check the review status of games as often as the daily sales figures. The ranking system is a leading sales indicator because good rankings induce players to purchase the game. “Movies have Roger Ebert. Wine has Robert Parker. Videogames have Marc Doyle.”<sup>6</sup> We need criteria other than sales or popular approval to appreciate videogames works and events. Sites like Metacritic have done a lot of damage to videogames as a medium, because they consolidate how people determine what makes a game “good” around a reductive set of ideals. This trend toward consolidation can be reversed. We might re-diversify how games are considered “good” along more divergent criteria.

Well beyond the domain of aggregate reviews, the corporate game industry determines the cultural frame of videogames through advertising empires and global market share. Game designer and theorist, Celia Pearce, has observed that, until recently, the structure of the major game studios has mirrored that of the American film industry of the 1930s and 40s.<sup>7</sup> Under the old Hollywood regime, studio executives had absolute control over creative output. Actors, directors, and writers, often received no credit, regarded as interchangeable cogs in the media output machine. Just as the situation eventually changed in Hollywood, now it is changing in the game industry. Raph Koster optimistically claims indie *is* the new industry. Instead of top-down distribution systems, many-to-many systems are becoming more prevalent. Access and visibility are beginning to spread, but major

console developers are still holding tightly holding the reigns over the flow of content that is available on their devices.

Pushing at the edge of mainstream tastes, *Braid* is distributed over Xbox Live Arcade. Pearce appears ambivalent but optimistic, as “to the game companies working for ‘the man,’ *fIOW*’s That Game Company is developing its next anxiously awaited PS3 offering. While Sony is letting them do their own thing creatively. How else could a game called *fIOver* make it onto an adrenaline-infused console platform like the PS3?”<sup>8</sup> The prohibitive costs of production, marketing, licensing, and approval to publish on the major consoles still heavily filters the flow of distribution. The situation is marginally improving in light of recent advances in middleware and distribution services over the highly regulated, private networks of Nintendo, Apple, Microsoft, and Sony. Nintendo touts WiiWare as a “game-creation service that will allow developers large and small to create new downloadable video game content” for their virtual console network. This service has not been as open as promised, although, according to independent developers like Ron Caramel (of 2D Boy, *World of Goo*), WiiWare is better for independent efforts than Microsoft’s game network.<sup>9</sup> Microsoft’s XNA Game Studio offers similar game-creation toolkits and run-time environments for the Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA) network, although Microsoft highly regulates the service. Peter Moore and Greg Canessa of Xbox predicted, “XBLA is going to be like the Sundance Film Festival of Games.” The problem with XBLA is that it offers low royalties, regularly de-lists games, and, at the time of writing, forces developers with games already on the network to judge new submissions. There is the lower-tier Xbox Live Community Games, but price caps, censorship and other regulations, discourage independent developers and artists from participating, and from divergent player communities from forming.



Figure 0-2 *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* is lauded by game enthusiasts as exemplary of the artistic potential of games because it comments on sensationalism in media, but has the tactic of ironic shock been outmoded by popular culture?

Intellectuals in the game community have tried to shift the larger cultural frame of videogames, and have done so forcefully, at times. The result is that terms like, “art,” and “avant-garde,” have become bludgeons to hit, supposedly unsophisticated, audiences, with games that are shocking, ironic, or comically exploitative, with the intention of convincing these audiences that this is the path into that high, ivory tower of art. Critical of this approach, Henry Jenkins sees the language of art theory, as applied to videogames, especially in master’s degree programs, as “sluggish and pretentious.” He prefers that creators and critics of videogames use the language of design, ideally, of game design. Describing a typical experience at a conference, Jenkins says that the:

artists were trying—without much success—to describe what the computer brought to their art, but they kept falling back on high modernist and early postmodernist categories. [...] On the other hand, the game designers were struggling to find words and concepts to express fresh discoveries about their media. [...] The game designers were creating works that sparked the imagination and made our hearts race. And they were doing so without the safety net that inherited modernist rhetoric provides for installation and hypertext artists.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, Jenkins makes a modernist move here, using some of the historical language of the avant-garde itself. He wishes to reject history and discover a new language to adequately deal with new media. Jenkins does make a valid point, however, because it is true the terms “art” and “avant-garde” are often unconvincingly used. They feel forced, as if we are trying to convince people that undeserving works are somehow interesting and worthy of attention. Even so, art is still a rich, global, and ancient cultural phenomenon that can reveal a lot about videogames, and what their role in culture is, and what it could be. We should not shy away from the term “art” to describe videogames, but we should approach the subject in a culturally and historically grounded way. Design and art have an ambivalent relationship in the field of the avant-garde, because within that field design and art are questioned as to what their formal rules and cultural functions should be. Avant-garde art diversifies design, bringing it into alien territories; it invents new social functions for design (occurring most famously with the Bauhaus); or, it formally deconstructs popular design (as in the work of Richard Hamilton). One of the goals of this research is to provide the means to move beyond the dominant metrics of formally “good” game design, and beyond politically “good,” or academically approved, videogame actions and events.

## “Are Videogames Art?” Debate



Figure 0-3 Roger Ebert sparked an ongoing public debate on whether videogames are art, a debate that remains ahistorical.

“Are videogames art?” is a confusing question because of the blurred cultural frame of what “art” means. “Art” changes according to cultural context and to the person speaking. Much of the blur actually comes from the century of experiments and creative abuse that the historical avant-garde perpetrated on the popular understanding of where the boundary and cultural category of “art” is, and where the artists thought it should lie. Film critic, Roger Ebert asks: Is the *medium* of videogames artistic, can art be made with and through the particular technologies and cultural conventions of videogames, as it can (according to both the mainstream and the academic art establishment) with photography or film. The answer is no, according to Ebert, the medium of videogames cannot support art. For Ebert, the

artist is an author and a director who must predetermine what the audience's aesthetic, cognitive and emotional responses will be. Videogames require players to partially structure their play experiences. The author abdicates her control, and it is here that the claim of videogames being art is lost in the world of Ebert. Mutability, especially combined with replayability, is a death knell:

If you can go through "every emotional journey available," doesn't that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices. [...] I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist. Would "Romeo and Juliet" have been better with a different ending?<sup>11</sup>

Ebert's argument is ironic, because in his own domain he speaks of the need to manage cinematic experiences. You must get into a particular mood, look for and desire the right things, when going to see *The Human Centipede*, versus *Memento*, versus *Spiderman 2*. Ebert teaches us how to appreciate a film, how to locate it within the cultural moment. His reviews are rife with anecdotal twists, things he worked out in his understanding of a film as he viewed it. Ironically, Ebert's very career is built on fleshing out the fine-tuned level of control film viewership actually has.

Game enthusiasts reverse Ebert's logic to say that videogames are (always potentially, in some bright future) a greater medium for art than film or literature. For advocates of the artistic potential of videogames, the distribution over control is the selling point. Games are reactive. A player's actions affect the nature of the experience, but not only interpretatively, they affect them configuratively, transforming the structure on which the emotional journey rides. Playing this card, Will Wright of *The Sims* fame, claims that videogames are the first medium in which



people can actually experience guilt because players can reflect on the effects their actions had on the world. In *The Shadow of the Colossus*, many players express ambivalence in slaying a series of forlorn creatures that are so massive, they feel like moving, sentient architecture. As the game progresses, it becomes clearer that killing may not be justified. As with Ebert's odd criterion, however, Wright's claim is refutable. Direct action is not necessary to register guilt. People identify with a group's actions and histories, which manifests, for example, in "white guilt," or feelings of national guilt.

If players manage their experience of games more comprehensively than their experience of film, does that not mean that videogames are a greater art than film? Does that not mean that games are more difficult to effectively make into art? Considering that different people play games in different ways, to make a videogame that is compelling and meaningful for a broad audience would be exponentially more difficult. Using Ebert's own criterion, videogames would constitute a more advanced artistic medium than film. It is too bad Ebert's criterion is ahistorical and arbitrary, which renders this reverse argument on the superiority of games useless. Ebert's ignorance of the last century of art, and the past several decades of games (ignorance, he now admits), undermines the argument, along with any reverse arguments. I bring up this reverse argument because game enthusiasts have been making it, and have done so with the purpose of qualifying the medium as inherently more "avant-garde" than other mediums. Espen Aarseth, who is associated with ludology, a formalist version of game studies, is a famous advocate:

The successful ergodic [interactive and reactive] work of art maintains tension and excitement while providing a path for discovery, a coming into focus of a didactic of the design and hidden principles at work in a work. In

some cases, typically adventure games, this coming into focus is in itself a design principle, a necessary part of the user's experience. In other cases, such as an abstract painting (e.g., works by Jackson Pollock), it is optional but enriching.<sup>12</sup>

This is not how we should compare paintings by Jackson Pollock and avant-garde videogames. If we disregard cultural, historical, and material context, we are repeating a mistake that plagued much of art criticism in the 20th century. To champion videogames as art by stepping on the neck of painting or film is misguided. It is to make claims too easy to dismiss by contemporary critics or avant-gardes working in other fields such as genetics, etc. Historically, the term "art" has been invoked in competitions between traditional and emerging mediums in the rise of every "new" medium. Clashes between painting and photography a century ago, between film and video several decades ago, between digital art and analog art even more recently, have all wrestled over who gets the keys to the car. Looking back and at the present day, we can see that painting, photography, film, and various forms of digital art, are all capable of supporting art in the popular consciousness, that each of them are driving in their own directions.

A notable exception is video art, which still not understood, let alone encouraged, as art in popular culture. Even in the art academies, video struggles for headway and departmental funding. Mainstream sensibility may chafe at the concept of "video art," but, ironically, we generate it in droves, in "YouTube Poop," and innumerable little eddies of remix culture. Due to their growing technocultural influence, it is not beyond all possibility that video and videogames will be accepted into both the popular and elitist canons of artistic mediums, but not because they superseded or emulated another medium, such as film. It will be because videogames have proven their cultural relevance by developing artistically in both

populist and elitist spheres. It would aid both sides of this process if videogames were adopted as an artistic medium in fine art schools. For example, the historic San Francisco Art Institute has offered a course, “Game Design as Art Practice,” by Jane McGonigal, signaling a subtle shift that should be pushed harder. But beyond the occasional elective, videogames are not a minor, major, or department, within any school dedicated to fine art, unlike video art, net art, sculpture, dance, photography, film, or performance art.

## Videogames and High Art



Figure 0-4 *The Problem We All Live With* (1964), by Norman Rockwell guides the viewer into having a canned emotional response, and is therefore, kitsch.

“Are videogames art?” is often another way of saying: “Can videogames be ‘high art’?” Can certain videogames be more edifying and culturally enriching than popular entertainment? This elitist definition of art is far older than modernism. It

exists in any culture that separates an artisan, or folk art, from a more esteemed art controlled or patronized by power elite whether it is religious, militaristic, or oligarchic. A strong cultural division between folk art and official art was evident in Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations, for example.<sup>13</sup> The “official” art of ancient Egypt occasionally borrowed conventions from craftwork in order to become more fluid and “naturalistic” in style, especially during the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten. Although the division of high and low art is global and historical, we can credit the “czar” of high modernism, Clement Greenberg, for popularizing the concept in U.S. In his landmark essay, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” in 1939, Greenberg defined the dichotomy between a high, “difficult,” avant-garde art, and a low or “easy” kitsch:

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end. A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest—what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other? Does the fact that a disparity such as this within the frame of a single cultural tradition, which is and has been taken for granted—does this fact indicate that the disparity is a part of the natural order of things? Or is it something entirely new, and particular to our age?<sup>14</sup>

It is tempting to mistake correlation for causation in this passage. According to Greenberg, popular entertainment is not bad because it is popular; it is bad because it is mind-numbingly formulaic. Coming from a Marxist perspective, Greenberg did not have contempt for the masses, but wished that people would challenge

themselves more fundamentally as they engaged media. This desire underwrote Greenberg's efforts to popularize avant-garde art domestically and abroad. This same motivation fueled Wassily Kandinsky's efforts to nationalize avant-garde art education in revolutionary Russia, one of the rare moments in history when an avant-garde mass art seemed poised to thrive.

For Greenberg, it was necessary to distinguish avant-garde and kitsch, not based upon popularity, but according to criteria that is aesthetic and cultural. Kitsch recirculates the same sentiments through paintings, radio, film, and so on. It causes us to think thoughts we already know. It is the childish mirror of culture. Popular entertainment is only bad to the degree that it is easy to consume. This is not a misanthropic theory: if difficult art become popular, its popularity would not make it kitsch. The global trend in culture is that people want kitsch because our lives are already difficult enough. We like our rituals just fine. To question the old ones or to invent new ones is painful. That is, unless the new rituals can outperform the rituals we already know into greater exaggeration (for example, when Lady Gaga recapitulates and exaggerates Madonna, or when WarioWare *condenses* Nintendo's history into a caricature). The avant-garde unworks the rituals already entrenched, or it tries to lie down new track. The avant-garde "keeps culture moving" while popular kitsch causes cultural stagnation:

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.<sup>15</sup>

An avant-garde cubist painting by Picasso, for example, is “austere and barren” in comparison to a nostalgic illustration by Norman Rockwell. Rockwell “deceived” viewers into cookie-cutter emotionality, sentimentality, nostalgia, nationalism, unity, sacrifice, innocence—all which seem quite quaint by today’s standards. In comparison, Picasso respected viewers as agents willing and able to question and play with their own practices of looking. A cubist painting is not a window to look through. A cubist painting is an aesthetic object to play with, mull over, and return to. A Rockwell illustration is interpretable in one way: a window into a quaint rustic fantasy. It nourishes a cultural nostalgia, a longing for simpler, purer times. Pricklier kitsch is a bit more interesting. An image of a little black girl going to a desegregated school in *The Problem We All Live With* depicts a tragic moment, iconic of America’s national wound that is painfully healing, to which we know exactly how to respond. The strongest kitsch images of popular media today are of the burning Twin Towers on 9/11. We know exactly how to think and how to feel when we look at a Rockwell, or when we look upon the horrific scene of 9/11. Kitsch increasingly uses controversy and titillating shocks, because those are the patterns we increasingly expect and demand of media. With a Picasso, we do not know how to feel, or what to think, and must dig around to construct a response.



Figure 0-5 Roger Ebert considers *Spiderman 2* to be great kitsch, but denies that it is art, echoing the same cultural division of media made by Clement Greenberg.

Notice that the desire for a strong authorial management of a viewer's cognitive and emotional response—Ebert's criterion for great art—is Greenberg's criterion for kitsch. Ebert is not ignorant of this complicity. He openly wishes that great art, rather than great kitsch, could someday become popular. Ebert confesses that he has settled for a middling critical life:

I enjoy entertainments, but I think it important to know what they are. I like the circus as much as the ballet. I like crime novels. [...] And I like horror stories, where Edgar Allen Poe in particular represents art. [...] The movies are so rarely great art, that if we cannot appreciate great trash, we have no reason to go. I admired "Spiderman II," "Superman," and many of the "Star Wars," Indiana Jones, James Bond and Harry Potter films. The idea, I think, is



to value what is good at whatever level you find it. “Spiderman II” is one of the great comic superhero movies but it is not great art.<sup>16</sup>

Greenberg’s division between art and kitsch is alive but the bar, lowered. A fallen elitist stuck in the landfill of pop culture, Ebert separates great trash from bad. He implores the film industry to raise standards, for example, in his book of negative reviews, *Your Movie Sucks!* He challenges the public in general to be more demanding of Hollywood in return. Ebert uses his annual “Overlooked Film Festival” to raise the bar divided high and low art for a bit: “As film exhibition in North America crowds itself ever more narrowly into predictable commercial fodder for an undemanding audience, we applaud those brave, free spirits who still hold faith with the unlimited potential of the cinema.”<sup>17</sup> Ebert’s model is an adaptation of Greenberg’s, but far more flexible in its critical gymnastics. Still, the more Ebert of games we can get, the less we will lean on the metacritics.



Figure 0-6 *World of Warcraft*, like the film *Spider Man 2*, or a Rockwell painting, is designed with the goal of fostering predetermined thoughts and emotions, in this case, a sense of danger and heroism in an epic battle.



Game enthusiasts tend to agree with Ebert's model, but disagree with the conclusions he draws. Enthusiasts accept the dichotomy of a high and a low, but wish the best of games to be brought within the "velvet rope," as game artist and theorist, Jason Rohrer, has put it. Rohrer follows Ebert, but pulls certain games into prestigious art party. The videogame, *The Legend of Zelda*, is high art as is the film *Citizen Kane*, whereas the *WoW* franchise is more like great entertainment, akin to *Spiderman 2*. Henry Jenkins advocates such a view, while adding a rhetorical somersault. He keeps the line where it is, but flips the hierarchy so that great trash is raised above great art. Great design is more honest than art. Game designers should be privileged, not artists who deign to work with games:

But if games are going to be thought as art, let it be because of what Shigeru Miyamoto (Super Mario Brothers) does again and again and not because of what some pedigreed artist does once on a lark. Calling videogames art matters because it helps expand our notion of art and not because it allows curators to colonize some new space.<sup>18</sup>

The facile corruption of the "art industry" is a point well taken, but the feigned purity of games is a self-defeating strategy. As art, videogames are enriched by having a diverse field of artists (who likely disagree on what a "videogame" even is) work with them. This is because culturally, videogames are *not* a medium. Videogames are a commercial media product. The more "impure" the medium gets, the more its formal conventions and social meanings, are opened up and rendered malleable—by waves of artists, designers, hackers, griefers, etc., who diverge and disagree with each other—the more it will culturally function as an artistic medium. Art is both populist and elitist. Various groups and attitudes toward art, feed off of one another. Jenkins advances a populist definition of "videogame art," a definition

that only recognizes well-designed entertainment. For Jenkins, videogame art is allowed to advance kitsch, but not too fast, and not too critically, and not too experimentally, and not by artists coming from other fields and industries.

Steven Spielberg desires to muddy the waters in a grand marriage of film and games, famously stating his wish to create videogames that induce players to “cry at level 17.” Spielberg mixes Jenkins’s popular definition of art with a dramatic definition of epic art. With regard to games, this is usually understood in comparison to the dramatic power that film achieved in the early to mid 20th century. Spielberg conception of epic art correlates with Roger Ebert’s vision of high art (the greatest stuff that even surpasses the great trash). Both Spielberg and Ebert are building off of the historical legacies of the “total artwork,” as Richard Wagner attempted in his 19th century operas. The total artwork is motivated by an epic story set in worlds that wholly immerse you. If the kitsch is grand enough, then it feels totalizing and worldly. This total, dramatic art is suggested when we pine for videogames to someday achieve their own *Citizen Kane*, or *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Postmodern game enthusiasts are more open than popular modernist approaches. Postmodernists wish to dispense with the historical goals of advancing an epic, dramatic art or even exquisitely designed populist art. They dispose of the historical divisions of high and low art altogether. This rhetoric melts hearts because it reflects contemporary attitudes of relativity, while still catering to the desire to do big, wonderful things. It just never quite knows what these things might be. Horror author and game writer, Clive Barker, defends the artistic merit of all videogames by trudging into some squishy territory:

You have to come at [videogames] with an open heart... Roger Ebert obviously had a narrow vision of what the medium is, or can be. [...] We should be stretching the imaginations of our players and ourselves. Let's invent a world where the player gets to go through every emotional journey available. That is art. Offering that to people is art. [...] We can debate what art is, we can debate it forever. If the experience moves you in some way or another ... even if it moves your bowels ... I think it is worthy of some serious study.<sup>19</sup>

To which Ebert deftly replied, "if the experience moves your bowels, it is worthy of some serious medical study." Who gets to draw the great division between kitsch and art? One person's irritable bowel syndrome is another person's emotional arc. Populists and elitists advance the social construction of "art" they like, which is expected, but the problem is that they do so as if it were universal. What would it mean to afford both populist and elite categories of videogame art? How could they both be operational at the same time without cancelling the other out?

## Art as “Making Special”



Figure 0-7 Anthropologist, Ellen Dissanayake, claims art is a natural human proclivity, manifesting in a variety of culturally specific ways such as embellishing and shaping the way we dress, display objects, tell stories, dance, and perform.

Like the debates occurring in popular culture, there is contention in academia over what “art” exactly is. According to Pierre Bourdieu, art arises within a field of cultural production, and is not a unified entity but a multiplicity determined by each community that practices art. Art historian, Arnold Hauser, makes the reverse argument. Hauser synthesizes a global and totalizing Marxist history of art. He accounts for art in antiquity through to the present, across continent and cultures, within a single framework.<sup>20</sup> Anthropologist, Ellen Dissanayake, provides a culturally universal view of art, like Hauser, but her approach is more plastic,

resting on Darwinian and biological assumptions. Dissanayake sees art as a universal human category. For both Hauser and Dissanayake, “art” predates the rise of high art, as we know it, occurring in the Renaissance. Art arose long before the division between folk art and official art in the Babylonian and Egyptian empires. This expansive view of art is not the exploded view in which anything goes, as it is for popular postmodernists who might see a troubling-then-sublime bowel movement as art.

Art is a distinct cultural category that existed before modernity, and will continue to exist, regardless of the specific empire, age, or technology that is constructed by, and that conforms, culture. Dissanayake defines art in deceptively simple terms: “Art is making special.” Art permeates our cultural rituals: “Art is as universal, normal, and obvious in human behavior as sex or parenting.” Art is culturally constructed on the one hand, as Bourdieu argues, but is also shaped by emergent, Darwinist principles, on the other hand, as Dissanayake argues. Art is fundamental to human experience, it moves within our cultural cores akin to the realms and rituals of eating, faith, health, sex, and of family:

At first glance, the fact that the arts and related aesthetic attitudes vary so widely from one society to another would seem to suggest that they are wholly learned or “cultural” in origin rather than, as I will show, also biological or “natural”. One can make an analogy with language: learning to speak is a universal, innate predisposition for all children even though individual children learn the particular language of the people among whom they are nurtured. Similarly, art can be regarded as a natural, general proclivity that manifests itself in culturally learned specifics such as dances, songs, performances, visual display, and poetic speech.<sup>21</sup>

How does art function? How does it “make special”? Art embellishes, shapes, plays with, explores, orders objects, and affords behaviors that would otherwise be ordinary, everyday, transparent, fading into the background noise of experience. You walk, but are you walking as if being watched? Does your walking become more flamboyant to attract sexual attention? Art aesthetically shapes rituals in ways that enhance survival. Art gives depth to experience. A social occurrence is transformed into an *event* (small and large) through art. The pomp and excess of a marriage ceremony, or the pounding rhythm of drums in a war dance, impress the events into the fabric of time. This moment is more important than normal moments. It deserves more emotional investment, effort, and focus. By stimulating people through coordinated sights, sounds, rhythms, tastes, sights, shared memories consolidate. Social cohesion is strengthened as many individuals intimately share a profound experience.





Figure 0-8 China's opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics orchestrated a human performance on a spectacular scale (2,008 synchronized drummers), domestically evoking a strong national unity, and internationally expressing the nation's global ascendancy.

Art enhances individual experiences as well as social experiences. Transitional and transformative experiences, such as going to war, or rites of passage are inherently stressful as the unknown threatens an individual's sense of security. Yet, dramatic changes are only possible through dramatic risks. If these dangerous, yet necessary, experiences are aesthetically punctuated, participants who were confused, fearful, and stressed, can focus on the rhythm of the drum, the application of face paint, the scream of the Army sergeant, the movement of a feather, and so on. In these focused moments of sensually charged attention, art provides a magnetic means to resist the instincts of fight, flight, and shock. You run, but run with clarity and memory. As social groups grew larger and more complex, historically, the need for countermeasures to artfully ensure unity and order became

more pronounced. The Frankfurt School was correct, perhaps more than they realized: art has always served a “culture industry,” from Paleolithic culture onwards. National spectacles, such as the 2008 opening Olympic ceremony in China, or America’s “shock and awe” campaign preceding (rhetorically, led by Donald Rumsfeld) and during the Second Gulf War, are war dances writ large, playing different functions for domestic or foreign audiences. Since the days of cave painting, art has been a conserving myth that constructed and conformed civilization so it might perpetuate itself. In Darwinian terms, art diffuses impulses that are dangerous to the status quo on the one hand, and propagates impulses that enrich and strengthen the status quo; on the other hand.

### **Avant-garde Reveals Art**

If we accept Dissanayake’s view of art as aesthetic ritual, we can approach the avant-garde with a clearer understanding. Most simply, the avant-garde is how culture challenges its art. This goes deeper than kitsch. This is a theory of the avant-garde that surpasses aesthetics or cultural critique. Art theorist, Krzysztof Ziarek, advances a “postaesthetic understanding of art” along the lines of Dissanayake. Ziarek claims that a “contemporary avant-garde” must approach “art as a certain type of transformation, engaging it on the level of the formation and redistribution of forces.”<sup>22</sup> The catch is that most art denies that it is art. Art hides its force behind transparent traditions, behind the way things are. Art pretends otherwise. Art hides in plain sight. We see a military parade and tend to think of it as just an old tradition. A summer blockbuster appears to be just another blip of fun and idiotic commercialism. The shock and awe of Baghdad on the news networks was just a breaking story, not a spectacle to consume. The avant-garde reveals art as such. Of course, the avant-garde might still be judged “aesthetically,” “critically,” and so on,



but these metrics are misleading on their own, in the singular, because individually they paint too thin a line. The avant-garde engages art on the level of its own formation of forces—wherever they appear. Not only does the avant-garde grapple with *Spiderman* games and movies but with spectacles of contemporary warfare. It does not only breach the castles of high art, but razes, exaggerates, and reveals all the little molehills of “low” art worming through, constructing, conserving, and perpetuating culture. It does all of this in order to change and transform art—as art.

If art is universal, yet diverse, so too must be the avant-garde. The avant-garde doesn’t feed off of the art “establishment” such as the MoMA, or the GDC or IndieCade, because the establishment that it feeds off of is technoculture itself and its artistic conventions, how videogames are regulated and consumed around derivative patterns. The avant-garde realizes how art determines innumerable moments and rituals that, collectively and privately, comprise contemporary life. The avant-garde spreads out through technoculture to challenge that diffuse, digital, and global order from many “other” sides. The avant-garde, as a concept, is therefore not only inclusive to non-Western figures and histories—an approach advanced by others, for example, in an anthology edited by James Harding: *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*—the avant-garde, as a field, is nurtured out of its own diaspora, division, and diversity.

How could the contemporary avant-garde open up contemporary art? Wikipedia, and commonsense, tells us that Anderson Cooper is just a news anchor on CNN. But taking the long view of art, Cooper becomes a boyish, silver haired entertainer, an iconic storyteller at the communal hearth. Cooper’s matte-painted, peachy face, his trained, terse and dramatic voice, and serious manner tinged with an undercurrent of snark (makes him relatable), draws millions of minds into an

orchestrated flow of emotion and attention. Which figures, historically, had such a role? Shaman, elders, bards, criers? Not a conspiracy theory of culture, but an art theory of culture. As people retell Cooper's stories they become performing artists by proxy. If we revisit Greenberg's contrasting examples of a cubist painting (avant-garde) and a *Spiderman* sequel or Rockwell illustration (kitsch), we can locate Cooper within the field of art. Anderson Cooper is a contemporary Rockwell. Cooper pretends to be neutral through heavy use of formulas. He just reports the facts. This is the story we tell ourselves. Cooper's show, as we well know, is structured, scripted, edited, filmed, and acted to according to familiar, conventional rituals. It operates within genre constraints, as does any media artifact. The key difference is that the news "genre" is not framed as one, not like the horror or adventure "genre" of literature, games, or film. Just like the conventions of a horror or adventure game or film, the anchor's demeanor and tone conveys the proper response, the way to react and feel for each beat along the story arc. When a Westboro Baptist Church member mutters something idiotic and incendiary, Cooper's derision becomes our derision and catharsis. The world that we know and desire is reflected back to us as if it were really that way. It is this kind of emotional transparency and highly formulaic structure that Greenberg critiqued of Norman Rockwell's illustrations.



Figure 0-9 Broadcasts on CNN are reframed as a popular form of “storytelling” by avant-garde news interventions of The Yes Men, who trick news agencies to tell the stories that the artists would like to hear about social justice.

If the normal news were reframed as one of our arts, as a collective aesthetic ritual that shapes our reality, how would an avant-garde transform this ritual and deform it into focus? How could an artist expose the aesthetic constructions of the “news genre”? That is the hard question, but what about more obvious questions. Why create “difficult news art”? Why reveal the kitsch formulas of Cooper? The Yes Men are an anti-globalist, culture jamming, activist duo who specialize in what they call “identity correction.” According to their website, TheYesMen.org, they impersonate “big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them. Our targets are leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else.” For one event, Yes Men co-founder, Andy Bichlbaum (Jacque Servin), tricked producers at the BBC into believing he was a representative of Dow Chemical ready to drop a breaking news release. Securing a television interview with the BBC, Bichlbaum announced that Dow Chemical was finally taking full responsibility of the disaster in Bhopal, India, in which thousands of people were killed in a Union Carbide pesticide plant (now owned by Dow). Minutes after the interview, an actual Dow representative contacted the BBC, who issued a correction. Dow was not going to

reimburse victims and clean up the chemicals that remain in the disaster site, after all. Through a brilliant performance, Bichlbaum publically revealed and deconstructed the artful nature of news events, and created a news event that millions of people internationally wanted to experience, but couldn't. The flow of the corporate news ritual was collected and twisted up in a way that revealed its underlying form. Not only the fact that the news clip is an artificial construction, but a highly formulaic construction, was momentarily given shape. The avant-garde event helps us ask how and why certain news events are selected, filtered, presented, and made special—and more importantly, why certain events are *not* reported in our digital hearths and screens.

Art exists. Traditions exist. History is not at an end. We have practices of looking, of playing, ritualized desires, systemic oppressions, and so on, just as we did in the 1930s, and in the 1330s, and like we will in 2030. Our rituals sustain us individually and collectively. Customs and practices determine life, not less so in contemporary capitalist society, if anything, they are more pronounced and entrenched, as they are increasingly regulated, distributed, and enforced procedurally and by “users” en masse. Just because it is now “traditional” to challenge art in particular ways (each generation of game consoles must be more graphically powerful than the last), does not mean that we challenge art in the most vital ways that are social, political, critical, sublime, beautiful (while we have been obsessing over graphics, how have we not challenged videogames?). The critics who categorize the “avant-garde” as an old, white, straight, male, educated, American or European phenomenon, are the same critics who ironically lament its “death.” That perspective lacks historical grounding, multiplicity, and imagination. It is death-driven, perhaps even subtly eschatological, in its wish to erase alterity and contingency in art. Power not only *has* structure today, power *is* the technocultural

structure. As artists like Critical Art Ensemble, and critics like Ziarek claim, the avant-garde has never been more important than it is today. The avant-garde is needed more in the field of videogames than perhaps anywhere else. It is the paths and patterns of force in videogames that an avant-garde focuses on: How is the cultural frame of videogames regulated and controlled? What “traditions” might a videogame avant-garde resist? What new “traditions” might a videogame avant-garde advance?

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## SUMMARY

Videogame tinkerers, players, and activists of the 21st century are continuing, yet redefining, the avant-garde art and literary movements of the 20th century. Videogames are diverging as a social, cultural, and digital medium. They are used as political instruments, artistic experiments, social catalysts, and personal means of expression. A diverse field of games and technocultural play, such as alternate reality games, griefer attacks, arcade sculptures, and so on, can be compared and contrasted to the avant-garde, such as contemporary tactical media, net art, video art, Fluxus, the Situationists, the work of Pollock or Brecht, Dada, or the Russian Formalists. For example, historical avant-garde painters played with perspectival space (and its traditions), rather than only within those grid-like spaces. This is similar in some ways to how game artists play with flow (and player expectations of it), rather than advancing flow as the popular and academic ideal. Videogames are not only an advanced product of technoculture, but are the space in which technoculture conventionalizes play. This makes them a fascinating site to unwork and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture. It is the audacity of imagining certain videogames as avant-garde (from the perspective of mainstream consumers and art academics alike) that makes them a good candidate for this critical experiment.



# CHAPTER 1: VIDEOGAMES AS AVANT-GARDE ART

## Introduction

What are videogames becoming? A videogame avant-garde has emerged which encourages us to ask this question among others: If videogames are an artistic medium, how so? How do videogames concentrate and reflect technoculture? How does technoculture concentrate and reflect itself in videogames? Enthusiasts claim the medium is poised to surpass film as the premier, popular art form of the 21st century, as well as surpass television as the most accessed. A contemporary avant-garde is challenging our notions—academic and consumer alike—of what videogames are and what they are for. The avant-garde of videogames lives within a contemporary technocultural context, rather than a context of elite art. The arena for the avant-garde is no longer what is commonly referred to as “art,” but the rituals of technoculture and entertainment. For contemporary “artists” (most of whom don’t self-designate using this term, but here I follow Dissanayake and Hauser), this plays out in a rich variety of ways.

French performance and body artist, Orlan, who undergoes plastic surgery as a part of her art, says, “The avant-garde is no longer in art, it is in genetics.”<sup>1</sup> Videogames are commonly framed as the latest technocultural entertainment. As a field, videogames are ruled from the bottom, through mass consumption; and they are ruled from the top, through multinational corporate power. In response, the videogame avant-garde approaches the field from a scattershot of directions as well, not only through canned political protests or tired artistic expressions and statements. What is interesting about videogames is that their relation to technoculture is distinct from the movements and mediums of the historical avant-

garde, as well as to other contemporary avant-gardes, such as body artists, like Orlan. They are not only an advanced product of technoculture, but videogames are the space in which technoculture conventionalizes play. How we play games propagates to other aspects of life. Play in games helps frame strategies and metaphors we use to think about and discuss big issues, like warfare and geopolitics, as well as personal issues, like our relationships, and careers. This makes videogames a fascinating site to expose, unwork, and rethink the protocols and rituals that rule technoculture.

What does the videogame avant-garde have in common with, and how do they differ from, historical and contemporaneous avant-garde movements: tactical media, the Critical Art Ensemble, net art of the 90s, cyborg art, video art of the 60s and 70s, Fluxus, the Situationists, Pollock, Brecht, Dada, the Futurists, Russian Formalists, Manet, the Impressionists? I hope the comparison will prove enlightening in two ways. We can gain a multifaceted purchase on the “videogame avant-garde,” on the one hand, and on the other hand, we can flesh out how the contemporaneous and historical “avant-garde,” is adapting and redefining itself through videogame artists, hackers, and collaborative communities. The videogame avant-garde faces cultural and technological constraints and opportunities, which other avant-gardes do not, or did not face. Videogames emerged from the matrix of the military-industrial complex in which social anxieties and economic outlays of the Cold War were formative to the many of the metaphors and spatial schemas that still dominate the medium both culturally and technologically. Contemporary culture flows in an elaborate and networked form of digital capitalism, a context precluding and affording certain avant-garde strategies and patterns unique to this moment in history, and to this field.

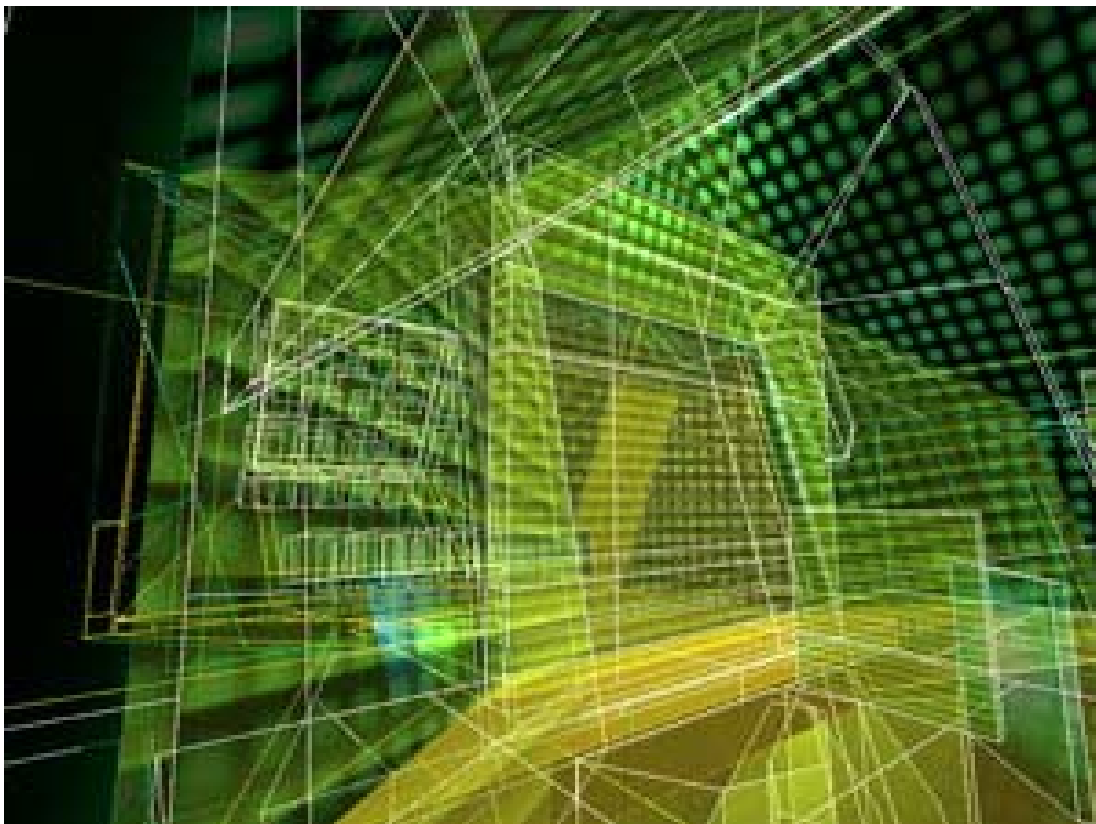


Figure 1-1 *Quilted Thought Organ* by Julian Oliver reinterprets conventions of the FPS genre.

I'll provide a couple examples of the videogame avant-garde to illustrate some basic ideas that shape and motivate this research. The first is Julian Oliver's *Quilted Thought Organ*, built with the *Quake II* engine, popular to create first-person shooter (FPS) games. The shooter genre attracts many avant-garde figures, because, according to popular thinking, they constitute the purest form of videogames. This is in spite of the fact that shooters only account for 10% of annual sales.<sup>2</sup> The familiar tunnels, platforms, and mutants are replaced in *Quilted Thought Organ* by ghostly geometries suspended in 3D space. Brush by or pass through them, and surprising sound are generated. Space is navigable, but the purpose and meaning of being in the space remains enigmatic. The environment in *Quilted Thought Organ* (shortened by Oliver to *QTHOTH*) is saturated with colorfully warped lattices. What are they? What are they for, and what you are supposed to do with them? Although the drive

to win is thwarted, by launching the game, you feel compelled to walk through the diaphanous forms to figure out what kind of relationship might be made with them. Walk and realize you're spawning riffs of atonal music. The swelling impulse to brush by the bright shapes, feels like the impulse to stroke an invitingly still wind chime. Turn around, and you see the inhuman geometries of gamespace transforming their shapes as you strafe, bump, and glide through them. Like the call-and-response scene of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the game is responding to you. The goal of determining all that is possible in this unusual videogame becomes an increasingly alluring goal.

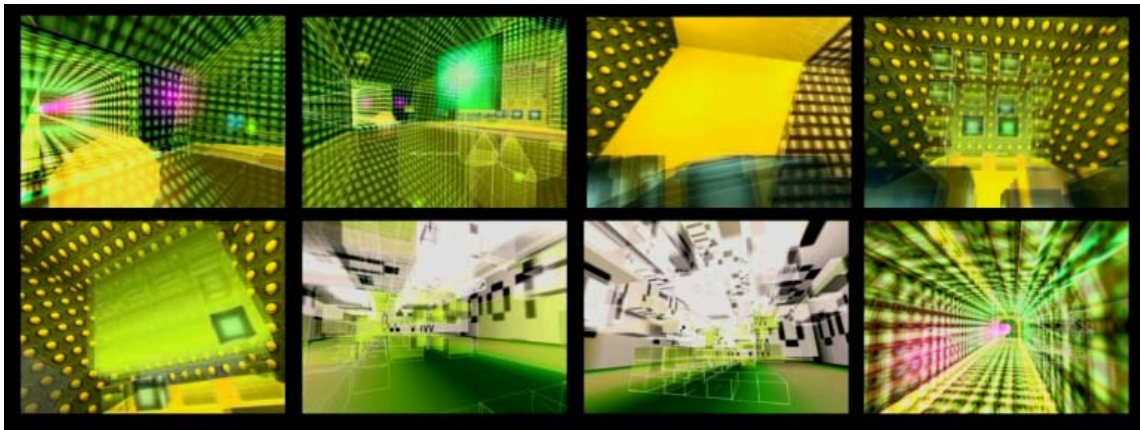


Figure 1-2 Screenshots from *QTHOTH* show how it manifests aberrant spaces, opening up our interactions with space itself and our associations of avatar motion.

FPS games conventionally direct players to goals literally: reach the other side of the level; or implicitly: players are impelled to master the space by stealth, firepower, tactics, etc., as they traverse it. These directives are imbued with authority and urgency, through military narratives and references, and threat of hypermediated death (reduced to a punitive interruption in the flow of action). By weaving goals into the fabric of space as FPS games do, gamespace becomes a secondary concern, merely a container for the riveting action at hand. *QTHOTH*

does something different. By using the same engine and input devices, but loosening them up, it unravels the familiar conventions by pulling the thread of mastery out from the fabric of space. This is critical: not *all* conventions are disrupted, only the familiar and centering course-of-action is disrupted. Gameplay is gently disengaged from the cycle of challenge-reward-challenge that flattens out 3D space into a linear zone which to stream through toward domination. Power is diffused into divergent patterns. Movement in, and transformation of, gamespace becomes a resistant and pliant thing to mull over and play with. The player might appreciate the sensual-virtual materiality of gameplay in a new way. If another game imitates *QTHOTH*'s new pattern of play, perhaps a budding new convention in gaming will have been created.

Avant-garde game practices materially expose, and culturally transcode, the field of videogames in ways that are more socially targeted than *QTHOTH*. Here, we have an exaggerated example, but more subtler and sophisticated examples will comprise the bulk of the socially oriented efforts examined in the following chapters. Socially oriented hackers, or griefers, challenge the rituals and protocols of massively multiplayer games and virtual worlds, like *Second Life*. One tactic of griefing is to program and deploy "grey goo," self-replicating objects, that multiply beyond the system's ability to model and represent them. The term comes from dystopian sci fi scenarios, in which nanotechnology replicates to the point of consuming bodies, city blocks, and planets. In *Second Life*, for example, grey goo sometimes takes the form of the golden rings from Sega's *Sonic* games. Golden rings rain, each new ring a spawn point for even more rings to appear. Eventually, the rings multiply beyond the processing power of the computer, hosted at the studio, Linden Lab, running the section of the virtual world. To use grey goo like this is a "grid attack," because if the computer running that section of the world crashes or

slows, it affects everyone logged onto that part of the system, or grid. A grid attack is a spatialized version of a distributed denial-of-service attack (DDoS), in which a website (any website, the Department of Defense, CNN, etc.) is flooded with spoofed data requests, crippling its server.



Figure 1-3 A griefer attack at a CNET conference in *Second Life* spawns objects that self-replicate beyond control.

The Patriotic Nigras are (were) a griefer group who focus in *Second Life*. Their first widely reported attack was at a virtual conference in 2006, hosted by CNET in *Second Life* (SL), where Anshe Chung was about to give a talk through her avatar, Ailin Graef. As Graef waited to begin speaking, a grey goo torrent of large phalluses began wriggling towards her in space. One of the reasons Chung was targeted is because she purportedly earned over a million, real world, U.S. dollars by selling

virtual property and services in *SL*. Philip Rosedale, the founder of Linden Lab, has called Chung, “the Rockefeller of Second Life.”<sup>3</sup> How she earns her money compounds the situation further: Chung regulates. Chung provides a service that Linden Lab does not. She enforces rules on virtual estates, renting to thousands of tenants who, in turn, run their own small businesses. Most tenants are not business operators but are still attracted to gated communities. To own land in Chung’s *Dreamland*:

You will have to agree to a covenant for all regions. These zoning rules are meant to protect your investment by keeping properties well maintained, landscaped and in “theme” in many sims. They outline the parameters that you must meet in order to have a compliant build.<sup>4</sup>

Restriction on pornography and harassment are Chung’s most tested covenants. The event that interrupted her business talk may be interpreted in several ways. Visually, the convergence of massive penises evokes gang rape. If Chung or her avatar were male, the attack by the Patriotic Nigras would likely have taken the different form; perhaps using goatse images (dramatically stretched apart rectum), lot of feces, old racist images of blacks, swastikas, and more random associations, such as faces of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Chung’s avatar was also swarmed with images of an Asian woman donning a hardhat with a jack-hammer-sized dildo. Ostensibly, it was all racist and sexist. These sexist and racist readings are workable, but simplistic, because griefers attack use whatever might confuse and offend most. Most simply, it was a juvenile prank, a little grab at power by kids using the means at their disposal.

Taking a step back, the CNET conference was, for all parties, about entrepreneurship in *SL*. From this perspective, the griefer event highlights the encroachment of regulation that follows every new market, and it unworks it. The grey goo flamboyantly trumps the desire for containment and control that is necessary to regulate a new economy of virtual goods and services. The pseudo-religious rhetoric of “covenant” is not unintentional. In secular terms, a covenant means “solemn promise.” The term is most commonly found in religious contexts, meaning a sacred agreement between God and humans. The modern concept of the magic circle, of play as restriction, play conducted in safe zones to protect players from the crush of cold, hard, unrelenting “reality,” is inflected in the covenant. Historically, the magic circle did not separate worlds, but the opposite—the magic circle blended worlds. It is this historic, premodern, dimension of the magic circle that is recalled when covenants are elided and play flows across boundaries and border controls. Instead of ordered accumulation, it floods. Patriotic Nigras embody the agonism latent in the market and law, the pseudo-religiosity of the virtual as the new Temple, goal-driven mastery, and they release the agonism so that gamespace is itself warped by it.

Misanthropic threads and utopian threads weave griefer communities together in strange ways. Griefing communities, like the Patriotic Nigras, are driven by an anarchistic desire for virtual worlds to decentralize administrative control and operate according to values that deviate from profitable regulation, and towards chaotic and fluid collectivism. They value contingency, participation, and celebratory waste. The Patriotic Nigras advertise and publish their scripts, such as those invoking grey goo, and carefully comment them so newbies can execute and iterate upon them effectively. They collectively authored an open source client that can run *SL* in order to extend their capacity to transform and together explore the



hidden affordances of the virtual world. They host forums in which budding griefers can ask questions and receive guidance on the most effective practices. This is not only protest, but also a competing value system of what virtual worlds are and what they are for. Most players who “protest” in virtual worlds (as is famously done in both *SL* and *World of Warcraft*) protest within the established world conventions. That is, they march their avatars through the world holding up little placards, and texting slogans. Griefers experiment with procedural forms of power directly. In their thinking, the battle is no longer about expression, but about the processes that underwrite expression. It is about foregrounding these processes as constructed and negotiable, promoting and provoking people to take up scripts, as they would take up arms against petty gods and tyrannical governments.

When avant-garde events erupt, or work appears, they seem nonsensical. They are mislabeled as purely misanthropic. In time, all the “disruptions,” slip into culturally parsable “protests” or “reconfigurations,” that is, it is increasingly apparent what the avant-garde has done and why. These in turn might eventually mellow into cultural “contributions,” reproducible by everybody, and are integrated into the common language of media. When the Futurists and Dada burst on the scene around World War I, nobody realized, not even the artists themselves, what history would make of them. They introduced tactics of randomness, rupture, and reconfiguration in art. Some of these once purely “misanthropic” tactics are now quite “anthropic,” providing conventional ways to convey meaning and mediate worlds. Tactics of the historical avant-garde now comprise core elements of the popular media grammar, such as collage, cut-and-paste, montage, and the jump cut. Currently, it’s difficult to sift through the new gamespace of *QTHOTH*, or to experience the varying affordances of grey goo, and discern any future in the warping and mixing of virtual, social, economic modes and spaces. It’s awkward to

appreciate exactly how and why they are revealing and unworking power. The “tradition” that the contemporary avant-garde emerges from is not the institution of high art, but the institution of technocultural entertainment, because this is the field in play. It is the rules and rituals of technoculture that they exaggerate, disturb into focus, and open up.

### **A Counter-Definition of “Videogame”**

It is common for game enthusiasts to treat videogames like an immature child to be nurtured into a healthy, thriving adult. But by projecting this fantasy onto games we are actually impeding “development.” It is common for academics, developers, consumers, and even some artists, to couch artifacts like *Quilted Thought Organ* as a “software toy,” rather than a videogame. It follows Will Wright’s suggestion that we should think of *The Sims* and *SimCity* as software toys, and not as videogames. However, if we maintain *in our* mind that QTHOTH is indeed a videogame, a shift in perspective occurs. We are enabled to see how it displaces and challenges what a videogames is, how a shooter is normally constructed and why. It opens up how we might play them, highlighting alterior play patterns or goals. Because gamer culture fetishes the future, it might be best to think of the medium in spatial terms instead of temporal terms. We might imagine videogames as a decentralized and uneven field outside of time. Within this field it is not the present, future, or past, that is prized, but all the various folds and clusters that construct the field, spatially spreading it out. There is not a prized heart, or center target at which to launch our aspirations and to pierce, but an unfolding space that revels in its own unfolding. *Tetris* lives in its own wrinkle that is no more or less a videogame than Julian Oliver’s *Quilted Thought Organ*—even if *Tetris*’s fold is massive and global in comparison. Avant-garde works are not outliers, but peaks of a shifting landscape.

One of the recurring impulses of the avant-garde is to reconfigure perception. They question what an artistic medium is. They play with the medium. Just like players that need a bit of room, time, and multiple lives, to play a videogame, the avant-garde needs some slack to play with the medium. The avant-garde feels out what the medium can do beyond its assumed capacities. It moves in directions that might seem blinding, offensive, or perhaps just alterior, if we keep an open mind. We need to operate under the broadest workable definition of “videogame” so we don’t omit from view the very subject that we wish to study. To appreciate the ways in which the avant-garde redefines the protocols and rituals of gamespace, we need be looser than might be comfortable in our definition. We need a *counter-definition* of videogames to challenge our conventional understanding of the medium’s constrictive category. The counter-definition I propose is as simple as it is broad. Videogames are: *play with technoculture*. Videogame purists will reject this definition outright. It negates precision and control. It diffuses too much authority over the field. Some very weird things, alternate reality games, for example, begin popping up in a territory used to hosting consensual greats, like *Tetris* or *Zelda*, and which just barely tolerated *The Sims* and *Farmville* being thrown in with their lot. This counter-definition is not a complete description, and is incomplete and idiotic on its own. It only makes sense in the way it augments, and how it haunts, the common categorization of videogame. It is merely slack to the tether. With the slack a counter-definition affords, we may triangulate mainstream sensibilities and commonsense toward videogames, but also explore some very rocky terrain.

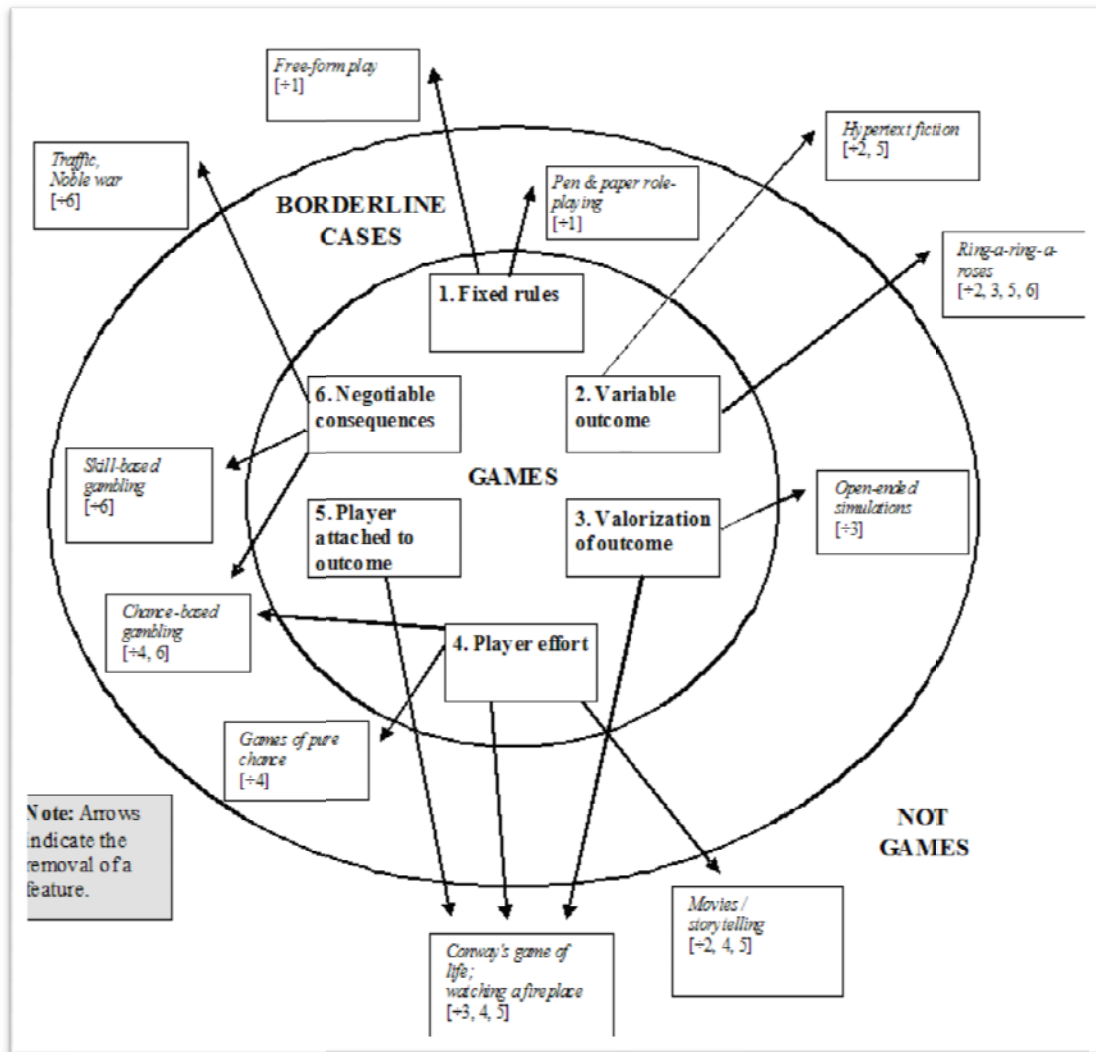


Figure 1-4 Jesper Juul targets “game” as the essence and heart of the videogame medium.

If we give ourselves, and our colleagues, some slack, we can be both accepting of them, while becoming more pluralistic. Standard academic definitions are correct: videogames are goal-based simulations, procedural narratives, rule-based systems, and so on. These essentialist definitions are only correct if they remain nonexclusive. If the formal definition aggregates, and is not prescriptive, it can remain open, extensible, and reworkable. It is common to treat a definition of videogames as a kind of design document. The definition of videogames that we carry reflects our desire of what we want videogames to be and to become. Formal definitions of videogames commonly collapse into a production milestone, as if the

medium were itself a game in production. It is popular to favor the “game” half of the term over the “video” half in our definitions. Although videogames are not usually played on video monitors any longer, “video” still cues us to all the support technologies videogames pull into their field and leverage as their form. To couch videogames as a guest on the sofa of “games,” is to fail to address this fact. The technological affordances of the hardware and software, the unique sensual capacities and rituals that are possible through them, equally comprise the medium of videogames. In line with ludology, Jesper Juul isolates the “game” concept in his definition:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.<sup>5</sup>

Technology, sensuality, and “extraneous” cultural rituals are ignored, as the more game-derived concepts: goals, effort, and rules, swell into prominence. Social and historical contexts of the medium are excluded from the definition, just as the dances of visual phenomena onscreen are not seen as such, but are reduced to mechanical evidence to direct the proper course of action. It is more than curious that for Juul film, painting and literature have material essences, but games do not. Juul idealizes games, which constrains them in a way other mediums are not constrained by his definition. This definition is not unusual, especially in the mainstream press and game reviews, which often adhere to a “popular ludology,” as in: “they’re just games, folks...” Juul equates an abstract model of games with the concrete and contingent properties of other mediums, jumping the rail exactly where it counts. He ignores the presence and embodied experience of videogames. Ludology cannot

account for the majority of the form of videogames, because it omits materiality, sensory engagement, and cultural conventions from its idealized version of the experience. It misses the present as it squints into the future, into a perfect fantasy, into the mythical, and blinding, “heart of gameness,” to use Juul’s term.<sup>6</sup> Juul does make a few small concessions to the open question of form in *Half-Real*, as he discusses the role and function of fiction. However, it is only because the cultural conventions of fiction can carry information about rules of play in “games,” that they gain any ground in the study of “videogames.”

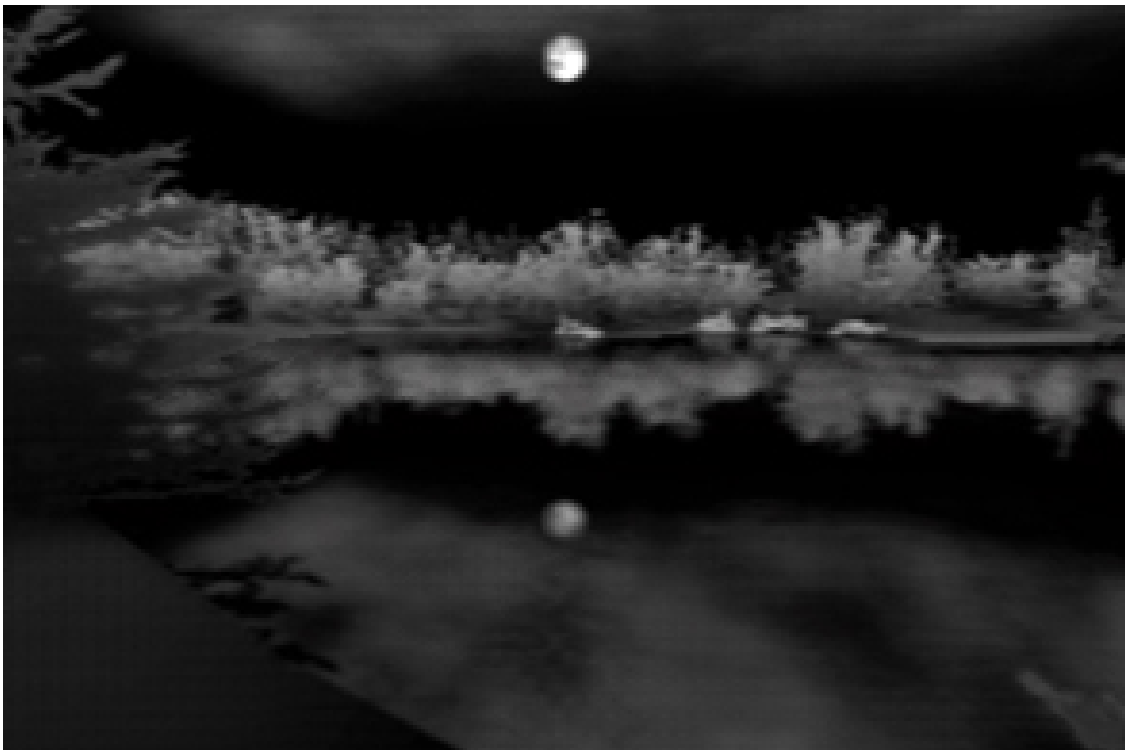


Figure 1-5 *Night Journey*, a collaboration of video artist, Bill Viola and USC, foregrounds the video in *videogame*, revisiting and reworking laserdisc games, like *Dragon’s Lair*.

Another prominent designer and theorist, Greg Costikyan, throws out more creative slack to the definitive space, as he sees it: “A game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through

game tokens in the pursuit of a goal.”<sup>7</sup> Although the first half of Costikyan’s definition invokes the term “art,” in an apparently open way, the second half slams the door by insisting on goals, which is modern and cerebral, favoring industrious, productive thinking contemporary culture assumes is a universal value that trumps other values. Few game theorists recognize the quirks and character of technology in their definition, and can appreciate the fact that intimate exploration with materiality has its own rewards. Pioneer of the game industry, and game community (as Game Developers Conference co-founder), Chris Crawford, is an early exception. Back in the 1980s, Crawford acknowledged that *video* games, by definition, have a material component. He situates the computer as a defining affordance:

Interactiveness is a central element of game enjoyment. As mentioned earlier, the computer’s plasticity makes it an intrinsically interactive device. Yet, the potential inherent in the computer can easily go unrealized if it is programmed poorly. A program emphasizing static data is not very dynamic. It is not plastic, hence not responsive, hence not interactive. A process-intensive program, by contrast, is dynamic, plastic, responsive, and interactive. Therefore, store less and process more.<sup>8</sup>

Although Crawford grounds his characterization in the physical properties of the computer, he cannot leave the question open. It must be singularly answered: creators should maximize computational, procedural power. There is no room for development, play, and experimentation that may need to store more and process less, for example. Where does this leave an ethereal videogame like *Night Journey*, a collaboration of Bill Viola and USC, which plays with the concept of “explorable video”? Even if processing power is indeed the arch strength of the computer, why

must videogames always maximize that power? Critics do not need to frame videogames as if designing for, and speaking of, the medium was itself a management game with stats and points to be minimized and maxed to achieve success most efficiently. The psychological lure of certain styles of gameplay is so mesmerizing that it structures our understanding of the medium itself. It is common for enthusiasts to allude to some great, unknown potential for videogames, but turn around and insist that they have the right formula in obtaining it, supplying the answer before the question is even asked.

The avant-garde focuses on many properties: game mechanics, networks, Euclidean gamespace, the player's bodies, the magic circle, the list goes on and on. To explore this diversity, I can't adopt an all-encompassing definition of "videogames." The definition must extend to meet the art and the artists, not the other way around. We can't prescribe how all avant-garde games should function, nor can we assume that they service our formal tastes or our brand of politics. The most interesting artistic practice outstrips its contemporary theories and critical methods by leaps and bounds. The purpose of the counter-definition: play with technoculture, is to play off the hegemonic and entrenched prescriptions of both industry and academia. Our understanding and expectations of videogames must extend beyond where game academics fantasize them to be: expression, procedurality, and pedagogy. In the eyes of the academic, videogames become machines for particular kinds of theoretical production (for ludologists, statements like "videogames are games," are considered tautological), which prevents the medium from being considered reflexively, or in an open, exploratory way.

A counter-definition challenges the videogame community to accept an extensible network of definitions, instead of a single pet definition, prescriptive



design document, theoretic program, or academic ideal. This research will examine dozens of events and works, many of which game theorists classify as anomalies and outliers, or not as videogames at all. They are not outliers, but bits of a continuous, diverse terrain. The current “project” of the videogame avant-garde, whether they know it or not, is collective and aggregate, each wrinkling the territory a new way. Rather than fearing the categorical dissolution of “videogames,” we should look forward to it. Culturally, videogames are not an artistic medium, but a kitsch entertainment product. If videogames really are an artistic medium, they will thrive. After waves of divergent reconfigurations, they will emerge as a “medium” in the popular consciousness. This would mark the end of “videogames” as we know them... as the rope slips and we lose our bearings... We realize just how parochial we have been all these years on our private mountains, listening to that siren song of our own beating little hearts.

### **Comparing a Mainstream Game and an Avant-garde Game**

In this dissertation, I try to avoid the term “mainstream,” but I sometimes use it to paint general swaths of a picture. Mainstream games and mainstream players are diverse. Are not casual players just as mainstream as hardcore players, even though hardcore players get all the sexy press? Casual play is perhaps more “mainstream,” if the metric is numeric rather than perceptive. It is worthwhile to compare a casual mainstream game and an avant-garde game to establish a basic point of reference, which will divide, twist, and dissolve later. The following two works are similar: both are 2D, use the mouse to point-and-shoot, are playable online, and were made with Flash. However, they provide two remarkably different gameplay experiences. *Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank* is a commercially successful casual shooter, while *September 12th* is a political avant-garde shooter in which the

act of shooting and its ramifications are made reflexive. PopCap, the developer of *Heavy Weapon*, is famous for its *Bejeweled* series, selling more than 25 million copies from 2001-08.<sup>9</sup> With its team of 180, PopCap is one of the leading developers of online games and teams with industry giants like Microsoft for publishing deals. *September 12th* is a nonprofit work created by a handful of people at Newsgaming with Gonzalo Frasca as game designer.



Figure 1-6 The player of *Heavy Weapon* frenetically eliminates all that moves in a tight cycle of flowing action.

According to PopCap, *Heavy Weapon: Atomic Tank* is a game that “brings classic shooter action to the casual gamer.” The game is a shoot ‘em up 2D side-scroller with a cartoon aesthetic and “easy-to-learn mechanics.” The sugary and thin back-story places the game in 1984 and is a pastiche of many disparate elements: the

dystopian futurist novel by George Orwell, America's position at the height of the Cold War, and tropes from the film, *Red Dawn*. The player guides a tiny yet "atomic" United States tank, the last line of defense from an invading Red Star army of thousands of planes, helicopters, vehicles, and ships. The game begins with a brief, campy cutscene in which a U.S. administration official advises the president to surrender. The secretary of defense retorts, "I've heard enough liberal whining! [...] This is freedom's last stand...Send in...ATOMIC TANK!" The little tank rolls laterally with turret gun firing anywhere the mouse (crosshair reticle) is located onscreen. *Heavy Weapon* is a frenzied yet repetitive twitch game that combines escalating challenges with an intuitive, "pick-up-and-play" interface. The point-and-shoot mechanic is instantly familiar to anyone who has used a mouse. This simple mechanic is used throughout *Heavy Weapon*, requiring the player to quickly track with the mouse and click-annihilate everything moving onscreen. To keep players off-guard, the game provides occasional unexpected complications: an aid helicopter periodically flies into the heat of battle dropping power-ups, nukes, shields, accelerators, and weapon upgrades. If the player accidentally shoots the helicopter, which inevitably occurs, she loses points but may continue to progress through the levels. The fleeting pre-play video of *Heavy Weapon* has a snappy, kitschy, and ironic feel setting the right mood. Gameplay is shallow yet sustainable, firing up the reptilian center of the player's brain with every eye-flutter-finger-click. Counter-intuitively, the abundance of references in the staccato, postmodern style: atomic weapons, cold war history, cartoon violence, etc., cancels out the need to associate any meaning whatsoever to gameplay. What is represented is not what is meant, and irony serves its contemporary convention as slippery veneer. The lack of meaning routes players into a slick, seek-and-destroy cycle, promoting accurate twitch reflexes, rather than formal exploration, or an open, playful attitude that explores its own contingent nature.



Figure 1-7 *September 12th* is a game that simulates the ideology of the “war on terror” as a positive feedback loop of escalating violence.

Launch *September 12th* and it addresses you as a political subject as well as a player: “The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror.” Continue and you find yourself gazing down upon an isometric view of a “generic” Arab town. Residents peacefully circulate through narrow streets. A few terrorists are mixed in, represented as caricatures wearing a keffiyeh or white headdress. You may aim and fire a missile to assassinate them, but a short delay prior to launch makes clean, accurate kills near impossible. The game simulates the collateral damage of surgical strikes, in which innocent bystanders often die. When bystanders do die, nearby onlookers grieve, then become enraged, morphing and bleeping into terrorists. You cannot eliminate the terrorists; the more you target for destruction, the more you

create. With its cartoon style and simple point-and-shoot mechanic, *September 12th* is similar to *Heavy Weapon* but only on the surface. *Heavy Weapon* channels the player into a circuit of play. *September 12th* asks the player to appreciate the circuit of play itself. Instead of training yourself to click on the right things as efficiently as possible, like *Heavy Weapon*, *September 12th* un-trains that behavior. The gameplay convention of point-and-shoot, along with reptilian strike mode that it idealizes, undergo a kind of live autopsy. To fire is to get caught up in a feedback loop of violence. The game reveals itself as a game, illuminating the assumptions we carry in our fingers and medulla oblongatas to such games. The micro-world of twitch reflexes spans a connection out into the macro-world of politics, and vice versa. *Heavy Weapon* provides an interesting contrast, because it uses irony as kitsch, a sea of references as a way of slipping experience into a flowing, buzzing enclosure. *September 12th* knows irony is no longer enough, and it is open in such a way that it draws consumable parodies, like *Heavy Weapon*, into its gap, and into its unworking of power.

### **Not all that is “Good” in Games is Avant-garde**

It is from a love of games that many avant-garde impulses arise. Enjoying mainstream games doesn't preclude us from appreciating avant-garde games. In fact, the more conversant we are of the former, the more we value the latter. Even if you support and appreciate the avant-garde, to equate the avant-garde with all that is “good” in videogames is a mistake. For example, *flOw* by thatgamecompany is not an avant-garde work, but it is an interesting formal experiment, and it does alter the field in its own small way (this is discussed in greater detail in the radical formal chapter). *flOw* is “bad” from an avant-garde perspective, because it advances the flow ideal, which is already formally common. But *flOw* is “good” from a

mainstream critical perspective, because it opens up opportunities for more indie gamemakers to further diversify the field. Most simply, the game is “good” because it’s fun to play, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the game for what it is. The videogame avant-garde does not have the final word on form, politics, narrative, or on what we should only play and enjoy. This is true of any artistic domain. Just as we can’t reduce the avant-garde to a singularly formal, political, or narrative framework, we can’t reduce all that is good or worthy of attention in the study of games and gamer culture, to that which is avant-garde.

While the avant-garde advances a diversity of approaches and interpretations of what videogames are, the most effective strategy to win greater diversity for mainstream games is to make them more relevant to, and representative of, our lives. This strategy can include the avant-garde, especially the liquefaction of videogames, covered in the narrative political chapter, but it must also reach beyond the avant-garde. To normalize women in gamer culture—to open up the role of women in games and in game companies—requires direct participation of the core mainstream. What Brenda Laurel and Sheri Graner Ray have been saying for years should be commonsense to all of us, but it is not. Ray sees huge untapped market potential in women’s games:

The game industry has long been looking for the “silver bullet” that one magic title that all women will play. They thought they had it with the “pink” Barbie games. Then they thought they had it with the Sims games. Currently they think they have it with the “casual” online games. Each of these categories of games has made money, but each time it results in the same thing, the entire market of “women” is re-categorized as one genre... There is no, one monolithic audience called “Women” who all want exactly the same



thing in games. It actually is one million markets... each one with its own tastes and wants in entertainment. The only thing these markets share in common is a particular chromosomal make-up!<sup>10</sup>

Ray is advocating for change within mainstream games. Ray is not advocating for radical avant-garde redefinitions, deconstructions, or experimentations of what videogames are or should be. From a purely negative and formal perspective, Ray could be dismissed as just wanting more mainstream games that flow. But to advocate for, or to create, a more meaningfully varied mainstream market for women's games is not unworkable from an avant-garde position. It is workable as long as we can maintain a multiplicity of perspectives, for example, allowing feminist goals to share space, and take turns with, other kinds of goals.



Figure 1-8 Executive producer of *Assassin's Creed II*, Jade Raymond, was featured in a pornographic comic in a Something Awful forum, exemplifying a trend of how gamer culture prefers to see and understand women in media.

Gamer culture has an image problem. The most circulated images and stories of women in games hew to the popular ideals of youth, vigor, and sex appeal. Presenting a woman's perspective in gamer culture, Jane Pinckard, of Game Girl Advance, famously posted images of herself affordance mining, and masturbating with, a vibrating peripheral device connected to the game *Rez*. Pinckard reported, "The thing is, though, it's often frustrating since the vibrations are not nice and steady, but sporadic." Any assertion of sexuality from a woman's perspective should be welcome, but it is a double-edged sword, as Pinckard and other women are too well aware. Women in the game industry are damned if they do and damned if they don't. They are held to a higher standard by feminists, but held to a lower, objectified standard, according to the hegemonic cultural views. Heavy hitters in the industry, such as Jade Raymond, executive producer of *Assassin's Creed II*, must constantly wield and parry the sword, just by being a prominent woman in the industry.

The "tradition" that the contemporary avant-garde emerges from is not the institution of high art, but the institution of technocultural entertainment because that is the field in play. It is the rules and rituals of technoculture that the avant-garde exaggerates and opens up. There is a general rule that informed historical high art, and still informs contemporary technocultural entertainment of games. Women are, preferably the object of desire, and not the strong central subject who desires, or who feels a range of other emotions. Male-normative culture prefers to look at women and control them. The reverse feels perverse: a woman controlling a male. Female sexuality, when it is present, is but a male fantasy of female sexuality, epitomized in service characters such as the manic pixie dream girl, hot worldly slut, motherly prude, rape victim. Sexism was endemic in 19th and 20th century art, most



visible in the fact that nude paintings of women were in vogue, the but not of nude men. This was a trend that long preceded the avant-garde, but one the avant-garde advanced as well, in Futurism, for example. Sexism was defended through the veil and guise of “sophisticated” readings. Feminist art historian, Linda Nochlin, summarizes the dilemma:

The acceptance of woman as object of the desiring male gaze in the visual arts is so universal that for a woman to question or draw attention to this fact is to invite derision, to reveal herself as one who does not understand the sophisticated strategies of high culture and takes art “too literally,” and is therefore unable to respond to aesthetic discourses.<sup>11</sup>

The cultural logic, and commonsense, was that men are thinking, active subjects – the artists; whereas women are fleshy, inert objects – the art. The parallel in gamer culture today is as striking as it is disconcerting. The cultural rule is similar in effect, but arrives at its defensive line coming from the opposite direction. If you critique the rampant sexism in games, you’re accused of being too high-minded or serious.



Figure 1-9 A poster for an Xbox community of women gamers riffs on the famous WWII propaganda poster, “We can do it!” featuring the cultural icon, Rosie the Riveter.

Much has been said about the misogyny and homophobia that exist within gamer culture, but the negatives are more prevalent in the misleading *mediation and representation* of a gamer culture as a horde of horny, basement-dwelling white boys. Because it is, at least in part, a battle over representation, rather than directly attacking what you are against, another tactic is to positively embody what you advocate. Create mainstream media that represents a diversity of gamers. Popular “commonsense” can still be challenged and transformed when different kinds of people create media in an earnest way. This happens despite whether these folk are driven by an avant-garde epistemology or strategy. For example, in the 1980s one of the most prominent women developers was Roberta Williams, co-founder of Sierra Online (previously On-line Systems). Williams authored dozens of adventures games, most notably the *King’s Quest* series. In her final work, *Phantasmagoria*, Williams brought the player into mature content world from a woman’s perspective.



Figure 1-10 Polished and compelling, but not avant-garde, *Mighty Jill Off* is a challenging platformer featuring a pudgy dyke avatar.

A rising tide is gently spreading out videogames into diverse cultural forms. Proud “Artdyke,” Anna Anthropy, of the website AuntiePixelante.com, says, “we must make the games we wish to play in the world.” and so she does. An overweight, lesbian heroine graces her platformer, *Mighty Jill Off*, in which the player serves a sadist queen. Anthropy explains:

My games are informed by my own experience; it would be strange if the characters weren’t dykes or perverts. But one of my motivations to make games is the distinct lack of real dyke characters and dyke desire in games. We see characters in commercial games who are supposedly dykes, but

they're written by men and drawn by men. They don't look like us, they don't express themselves like us, they don't lust like us. I wanted there to be games that are actually about queer women.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropy's strategy to further flesh out the cultural frame of videogames has a limited, but also a definite potential. As similar attitudes accumulate in the popular consciousness, the sexism in gamer culture can be undone. *Mighty Jill Off* is fascinating, novel and compelling, but that doesn't mean that it manifests the avant-garde formally, politically, or in terms of narrative. Playing a pudgy little dyke in a polished and challenging platformer is not uncanny, it doesn't unwork the flow, nor does it open up the gameplay experience. This is not to say that the work is not exemplary of the growing multiplicity of videogames. Anthropy drops a pebble in the pond. It ripples across blog posts, interviews, links, and internet searches. It may not be experienced as avant-garde, but that does not mean the game is not an earnest work that we should discuss, play, and celebrate. In fact, by sharing these games, and more of them exist all the time, is how we may help normalize gays, women, and people of color in mainstream gamer culture.

### **"Why Have There Been No Great Women Game Artists?"**

In 1971, Linda Nochlin, published a controversial essay in *ArtNews* entitled, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" It was an instant classic, and has been widely read in academia and the art world. The question has since popped up across mediums, from film to comics. For example, in Carly Berwick's 2005 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Comic-Book Artists?" Nochlin originally provoked us with:

The fact of the matter is that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated; nor have there been any great Lithuanian jazz pianists, nor Eskimo tennis players, no matter how much we might wish there had been.<sup>13</sup>

Elevating “forgotten flower painters,” even ones not forgotten, like Georgia O’Keefe, doesn’t help the situation. In fact, to play along, only exacerbates the problem. If we protest, and hold up an artist, say, like Berthe Morisot, as equal to Monet, or Yoko Ono as a genius like Joseph Beuys, we miss the point.

To answer the question: “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” is to tacitly reinforce its negative implications. We must look beneath the question, and into our cultural institutions for the reasons that such a provocative question could arise in the first place:

The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education-education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals.<sup>14</sup>

Historically and presently, there is an institutional sexism limiting the role of women in the arts. Looking at it the other way, it is miraculous considering the depth of the problem, that there are so many historical women and minority artists. The art community has been dealing with its institutional lack of diversity in recent decades, spawning hundreds of retrospectives and women’s shows. But even today, the number of men celebrated in galleries and museums still dwarfs the number of women present.

“Why Have There Been No Great Women Videogame Artists?” The question is idiotic, of course. By any standard, there have been dozens of great women game artists. Among the avant-garde, Jane McGonigal would undeniably be one of the leading figures. Yet again, while it is tempting to jump into a list of illustrious figures, to straightforwardly answer the question is a mistake. The objective of the question is to provoke an analytical mood, it is to seek where the oppression is coming from, how deep it goes, and to determine what must be done to open up gamer culture. The reason there are fewer women artists in the game industry is the same reason there were fewer in art: institutional sexism. Institutional sexism discriminates without any overt effort, knowledge, or intent by those being oppressive. This is because discrimination permeates the culture, shaping our commonsense and determining, “just the way things are.” For example, the prevalence of crunch-time in the game industry pushes women out of the field, as well as dissuades them to enter, more disproportionately than men. Everyone complains about it, but it has a more material and measurable adverse effect on women than on men. A study backed by the British Sociological Association, reports that in 2009, women comprise only 4 percent of the game industry workforce in the UK, down from 12 percent in 2006. The conclusion of the report was that “flexible working practices would not only improve the image of the industry as a family-friendly working environment, but could also assist in retaining more women, especially those with or considering having children.”<sup>15</sup>

The term, “feminist avant-garde,” is a contradiction according to feminist art critic, James Harding. A sexist foundation informs our cultural understanding of aggressive conflict: women of the avant-garde, “like women in the military, are—unfairly—always suspect and second class and are only taken seriously insofar as

they play a man's game."<sup>16</sup> Battling the misogyny of militarism by absorbing it wholesale, first and second wave feminism was often cast in avant-garde terms. A British émigré to the states, Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale surveyed "modern feminism" in 1914. Hale uses "the metaphor of an army to delineate the main body of parliamentary suffragists, the rear of municipal suffragists, a vanguard of 'advanced feminists', and an ultra-radical group of 'skirmishers'."<sup>17</sup> Although Hale's description is militaristic, it subverts the hegemonic logic that there is one ideal kind of feminist or avant-garde person, practice, or theory. Hale's description allows multiple kinds of work to be done by very different kinds of people. It does not place one feminist column above the other and affords fundamental difference. What Hale understood about feminism is applicable to the avant-garde historically as well as today. It is not by lineages, nor along one particular line, that we can trace the historical and contemporary avant-garde. It moves on many fronts and along many lines.

The avant-garde, historically and presently, is not one, but many. The usual approach in avant-garde studies is the assumption that there really is "an avant-garde" rather than "a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions."<sup>18</sup> If the avant-garde were reconsidered along these lines, not only would art history appear more clearly in its diversity, but we would better see contemporary art and artists more clearly as well. Harding argues that even today in art literature, there is a lack in the diversity of the views afforded, and that we are misled in playing the numbers game regarding women and minority artists:

the current discourse on the avant-garde [...] necessitates more than moving [women artists] from the shadows into the spotlight. It requires new theoretical terms and new (or revised) historical categories: it requires, in

short, a substantial shift in the critical discourse not just about the avant-garde but about what we designate as avant-garde.<sup>19</sup>

Other art and media critics, such as Drucker, Foster, and Krauss, agree that the historical avant-gardes have been mischaracterized. This has caused us to misunderstand the avant-garde as it exists presently. Theories of the avant-garde have been twisted by a discourse that is caught up in foregrounding negation, novelty, and oedipal lineages. Far more was occurring historically, and is occurring presently. Linear, positivistic revolutions have wrongly determined avant-garde histories and taxonomies. Avant-garde history, as well as the contemporary avant-garde, needs to be rethought. As Harding suggests, to comprehend an avant-garde of games, we must frame it as a diversity of peoples and actions that return to the most enigmatic epistemological, ontological, and social questions.

### Formal-Political Spectrum

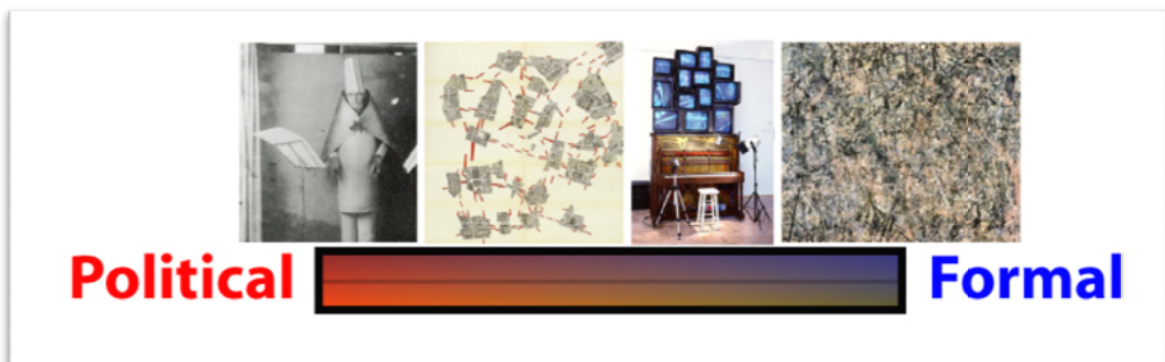


Figure 1-11 The avant-garde has historically been examined in a variety, or spectrum, of ways, ranging from political approaches that wish to transform society, to formal approaches that appreciate aesthetics, and “art for its own sake.”

The avant-garde has historically been approached *formally* or *politically*, or through blends of these perspectives. This may be imagined as a spectrum of perspectives with political on one end, and formal on the other end. The extreme



ends are *radical* political and *radical* formal. Most figures and works are not radical, moving somewhere through the middle, blending form with politics. The approaches that are afforded by this spectrum of views have been the basis of theories and the subject of debate by artists, critics, and historians for generations. In a radically formal regime, art exists “for its own sake,” and artists have free license to do work that doesn’t address social or political concerns. In a radically political regime, however, art exists to affect, reveal, and transform power and society. Radical political art is valued according to the experience that social groups have while engaging the work or event. Whereas formal work is valued according to the experience that individuals have while engaging the work.

The relationship of the formal and political videogame avant-gardes to mainstream commercial culture is complicated and ambivalent. What is today’s *political* avant-garde trying to accomplish: to inject political discourse into the medium, to motivate political action, to redefine the medium in the cultural consciousness, to redefine the public itself? What is it challenging? corporate aversion to investment risk in experimental games, the entrenched “genrefication” of commercial games, aestheticized violence, our agonistic drive toward ever-greater technical mastery? What about the formal avant-garde? Does it attempt to situate itself above the mainstream—to appeal to today’s connoisseur hardcore players, equivalent to yesterday’s elite salon patrons of Modern art? Are formalists vying for mainstream recognition, support by major studios, deeper appropriation by the art establishment, such as serious integration into the fine art academies (so there would be Videogame Departments, just as there are Painting Departments, Photography Departments, Video Departments, etc.), a more prominent voice and presence at game conferences and festivals—the reason IndieCade was organized,

for example? Or is it simply trying to spread out local roots in indie game art scenes, such as New York's thriving and intimate *Babycastles*?

### *Summary of the Formal Avant-garde*

According to canon, formal avant-garde artists interrogate and explore the properties of artistic mediums. Each medium has its own affordances, limitations, sensual capacities, and cultural history. The task of the artist is to develop, play with, expose, advance, or redefine these features. The iconic Modern art critic, Clement Greenberg, described avant-garde painting in medium-specific terms:

Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miró, Kandinsky, Brancusi, even Klee, Matisse and Cézanne derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.<sup>20</sup>

Greenberg's formalist category of "avant-garde art" is synonymous with "Modern art," of the last half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. This research will make an unusual, and admittedly problematic, move of placing Modernism *within* the formal avant-garde, in precisely this way. After postmodernism flooded the art academy in the 80s and 90s, formalist theory was been shut out as an anachronism, as too conservative, too apolitical. The result is that art and media critics tend to equate "avant-garde" with what is technically the "political avant-garde," that is, if we are looking from the perspective of formal critics. Recently, in order to reestablish a means of appreciating form beyond

politics, Johanna Drucker presents a theory she calls “complicit formalism” in *Sweet Dreams*, so that a breed of formal theory might live again among us.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1-12 Stan Brakhage glued moth wings and grass onto celluloid in the film, *Mothlight* (1963), so we may “imagine an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective” and see moving images without perceiving them as narratives, symbols, and spaces.

Formal works spring from the desire to play with, discover, and advance the unique possibilities and nature of each medium, whether it is architecture, film, literature, or videogames. Greenberg began with an open-ended list: “spaces, shapes, colors, etc.” The “etc.” suggests that this list of essentials is open and extensible. Over the course of his career, Greenberg focused more on one essence over the others: *flatness*. The flatness of the stretched canvas pulled tight, the way

blobs of paint could contrast the textured weave of the very surface it clung to.<sup>22</sup> According to formal theory, mediums should be reflexive, and revealing of their own form. Abstract splatter paintings present their own flat surface more than illusionistic works of receding depth. Likewise in music, arrangements of the twelve tones do not need to pull us into a flowing reverie, evoke a particular series of emotions, or convey a story. Dissonant, nuanced tensions and collisions among tones allow listeners to experience and focus on the formal properties of music outside the canned experience of associative reverie. Formalism pushes the medium beyond certain limits: narrative, textual, commercial, or political, in order to push other limits: to “see” with new eyes, to explore the human/inhuman boundary of experience that the medium can afford—perhaps exaggerating or breaking some representational rules to get there. The medium of film can be appreciated through the flash and click of 24 frames a second, where viewers can reflect upon a constant activity of film that is usually obscured by spatial, causal, and narrative, representations. Avant-garde filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, glued grass and insects directly on celluloid and painted on it. As it clacked and flickered through the projector, audiences experienced the entire process and apparatus of film: camera, projector, celluloid, light, eyes, perception, and cognition, darkened room full of people, and so on. The persistence of vision and the phenomenology of the moving image become objects of filmic scrutiny themselves. Perhaps, even the fact that you are sitting next to a stranger to discuss what you are experiencing, becomes a feature to explore. All these slippery “things” that wavered unconsciously beneath the experience of media, are encouraged to surface and actively transform that experience.

Formal art foregrounds the irreducibility of experience that mediums can create. It opens up being to the ignored contingencies, and peculiar nature, of

existence. Formal art is most revealing of the “human” when it is ostensibly least familiar to us. It highlights our boundaries of thought, perception, and play, by being unafraid to waver across and back from those boundaries. This explains the cliché: The better the artwork, the harder to describe. The common assumption that games must maximize an essential strength, whether it is procedures, rhetoric, “gameness,” narrative, and so on, comes from an oversimplification and misinterpretation of the historical formal avant-garde. People who advance such essences of videogames doubly constrain the medium. First, they wish for videogames to maximize their favorite essence, which the historical formal avant-garde did actually do as well. However, on top of that goal, game enthusiasts then further require videogames to service players into flow experiences (games that empower players in conventional ways), which runs counter to the formal avant-garde. Formal art allows us to listen to beating hearts other than our own.

Formal games manifest and foreground the irreducibility of play that lives beyond the familiar channels of flow. They demonstrate that videogames are a rich and plastic medium. The medium cannot be doubly bound, to essences and to flow, if we are going to honestly pursue and explore its art. Julian Oliver’s *QTHOTH* can be understood through the lens of the formal avant-garde, as it foregrounds the act of moving in a virtual space itself. Instead of constructing space as subservient to goals, or winning, Oliver’s work offers a novel mechanic of movement-as-sound, emphasizing one of the core features of FPS engines: the moment-to-moment act of moving in space. Player actions are virtually embodied in way that reveals itself in every twitch of the mouse. The experience of having to make sense of this distorted, alternate gamespace is *meta-challenging* rather than just challenging, like normal games. The work displaces the obvious, predetermined challenges of conventional

games. It affords gameplay as it simultaneously challenges and advances the definition of “gameplay” itself.

The videogame community must learn the lessons of history, or we are going to continue to repeat them. The early motion studies of Muybridge are not “less developed” than the complex filmic grammar of Hollywood films decades later. These are equal accounts of the medium’s potential, but along different lines. In fact, only together, and in comparison, can film be truly appreciated—not through the one mythical Great Work, but through thousands of diverging works, by many kinds of people. Each work illuminates a little area within a horizon of unexplored territory. Through waves of experimentation by generations of artists over time, formal practice sprawls across a vast, varied terrain of an artistic medium, a landscape most of us are disinterested in because it is too different or difficult to traverse and experience. Not surprisingly, formalist critics and artists clash over what the essences of a medium are. Historically, when formalists battled, however, they still realized that they were actually all of the same school of thought. This is not the case with videogames. Many in the game community are formalist, yet we treat other formalists as if they are alien colonizers, ludology vs. narratology, providing the obvious example. Greenberg’s protégé, Michael Fried, did not see flatness, but *opticality* as the essence of painting. In this paradigm shift, Fried transferred the essence of painting from something that lived in objects on walls to something that lives in our eyes, nervous systems, as well as objects on walls. Rosalind Krauss, another formalist, later argued that the essence of painting moved entirely within cultural conventions (it is how we train ourselves to think about and see painting that matters most). It is not like Krauss “disproved” Fried, nor did Fried “disprove” Greenberg. From a contemporary perspective, it is evident that each imbued the formalist camp with greater breadth, taking into account materiality

(Greenberg), sensuality (Fried), and conventionality (Krauss). It is in this vein that we should approach the formal and political videogame avant-garde—as aggregating diversity within the field.

Formal painters, from Monet to Rothko, were not as theoretical in their practice as Greenberg, Fried, or Krauss were in their thinking. Artists explored clusters here and there within the field of painting: the optics of color impressions, application styles of paint, and so on. Individual artists and critics tend to opt for one particular essence or technique to play with. This is why no medium can be fully appreciated through the vision of a single artist, or a single theorist. This is also why Picasso is the icon of Modern art; he understood this more than any other artist in the 20th century. Picasso forced himself into and out of “periods”: collage, cubism, “blue period,” etc., in which his techniques, along with the essence each technique foregrounds (color, perspectival space, canvas support, material assemblage), shift in very visible ways. Formalist *theory* can only be understood as a collective effort, not in spite of, but because artists and critics battle over what a medium’s essences are. This aggregative, generational approach is even more vital for videogames than it was for painting, because its technological support remains largely unexplored, and changes rapidly in waves of innovation. The fact that there are many competing definitions and lists of videogame essences suggests that the videogame medium is formally robust and diverse. If anything the bandied about list of essences is not nearly diverse or combative as it might be if we knew more about the history from which we are drawing from. Some videogames examined in this dissertation through the lens of the formal avant-garde are works by Cactus, Natalie Bookchin, Jodi, Cory Arcangel, Jonathan Blow, Eddo Stern, Mary Flanagan, C-Level, Jeff Minter, Brody Condon, Wafaa Bilal, Gamelab, fur, Adam Cadre, Jason Nelson, France Cadet, Farbs, Feng Mengbo, among others.

This is not to say that many formal artists aren't "political," or vice versa. Julian Oliver also makes overtly political work, such as *Escape from Woomera*, remediating a terrorist detention center in Australia for players to escape. The purpose of the formal and political spectrum is only to frame a field of activity, not contain and classify artists, theorists, works, or events. It is entirely possible to frame *QTHOTH*, *Mothlight*, etc., in terms of politics instead of form, or to blend politics and form more thoroughly in their analysis than I have in this brief sketch. The purpose is to flesh out a field of divergence, rather than to classify people or works into a taxonomy.

### *Summary of the Political Avant-garde*

At its extreme, the political avant-garde rejects formal concerns, and as it softens, it merely relegates formal concerns as secondary to social concerns and to power. Art is not advanced for art's sake, or videogames for videogames' sake, but art is tasked to expose, unwork, and transform, the cultural functions of videogames and the patterns of power in technoculture. The political avant-garde has historically disputed the idea "art" itself, claiming that art was no longer possible, or that what they did was not art. Softer attitudes accept art as such, but deny claims of medium-specificity and the formal obsessions over a medium's essences. The political avant-garde has opposed the formal avant-garde directly. Dada, a political avant-garde in the early 20th century, mocked Manet and Cézanne, two prominent formal avant-garde artists of the 19th century.

Responding to the trauma of WWI, Dada created shocking "anti-art," anarchistic, yet celebratory, theatrical events featuring gibberish poems, and vowed



to obliterate art as a cultural category altogether to shake the foundation of culture. German Dadaists exclaimed: “What is German culture? Answer: Shit!” Today’s political videogame avant-garde would echo Dada: “What is Videogame Culture? Answer: Shit!” Riffing off Malraux, apparently ignorant of the historical writer, an Anonymous griever explains his logic, “what is a man? A miserable pile of secrets.”<sup>23</sup> The sentiment is translated in exuberant apathy, fecal storms, and all sorts of procedural iconoclasm—an assault on our transparent use and acceptance of technocultural entertainment. Grievers realize a political avant-garde function similar to Dada and Futurism, and are just as contradictory and problematic. Instead of protesting the cultural category of art, they undermine videogames as kitsch. They oppose normative pressure on the medium and reach into the code to reformulate it against the cultural desire for stability, and for safely channeling our agonism into a flow. Grievers undermine the sense of empowerment that the flow of traditional videogames affords. A proponent of dramatic storytelling in media, Brenda Laurel argues that since videogames sanction us to “kick-ass” so thoroughly in virtual worlds they are making us apathetic in the real world—a negative view of electronic closure, flow, and catharsis.



Figure 1-13 Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) played *with* the rules of art (reworking the definition of art), rather than playing *in* the established rules of art.

Duchamp's *Fountain* was a critique on the institution of art, on the arbitrary nature of conventions in particular, and in general of deciding what was and what was not art. But an underlying, subtler critique in *Fountain* is often overlooked. There is another "institutional critique" peering through the porcelain sheen. The *Fountain* reverses technoculture in a way that is similar to a griefer attack. It foregrounds the social conventions by which we value technology according to its use value or to its production value. It is because of this second critique that art still "wins" in the *Fountain*. Historically, this victory has borne out. *Fountain* cleared paths for much more divergence of art, not less art. It is a humorous piece that bears a tinge of revulsion and not only in the reference to human waste. A glossy urinal, an industrial product that we have been intimate with, has been displaced from its conventional "use" and transformed into a smoothly aesthetic object. It asserts its

presence, its mass, its thingly quality. Underneath the armor of lightness and humor, an unnerving stain sits. The urinal sits there of its own accord, useless and heavy, glistening and gaping. Greenberg's metric for formal art still applies here far outside the safe bunker of medium-specificity; the *Fountain* manifests the irreducibility of experience. The two critiques of the *Fountain*, the humorous poke at the institution of art, and the thingly resistance to use-oriented modernity, also emerge in griever actions. The electronic presence of protocols, normally veiled, subservient to flow, irrupt as grey goo, slowing framerates, crashing servers, replicating virtual commodities until their exchange value reaches zero. Technoculture's wish for a flowing network is answered too forcefully, too many things happen at once as the flow washes back on itself.

For any writer, reader, or player, there will be videogame avant-gardes we like and identify with, and those we dislike and disidentify with. The structure of the theory of avant-garde videogames should help expand with whom, or with what, we can identify. I use griefers in the introduction because they are the most alien to, or unidentifiable to, many readers. The historical political avant-garde that succeeded Dada, such as Bertolt Brecht, a prominent playwright after WWI, to the Situationists after WWII, to The Yes Men presently, has varying complicit relationships with formal concerns and with popular culture. Instead of only iconoclasm, they engage more dynamically with the dominant cultural logic. Using integrated strategies, they leverage more ideas of the formal avant-garde as they reconfigure entertainment media. For example, Bertolt Brecht wanted to use theater as entertainment that could show a lay public how society is structured and manipulated. Brecht didn't want to destroy theater as entertainment but bend its cultural function toward subtler political ends. Most of the political events and artists examined in this dissertation are complicit rather than radical. Groups

studied through a political view include Anonymous, etoy, RTMark, The Yes Men, Impact Games, Patriotic Nigras, Molleindustria, and individuals such as Gazira Babeli, Jane McGonigal, Anne-Marie Schleiner, Celia Pearce, Gonzalo Frasca, Ian Bogost, Elan Lee, Joseph DeLappe, Susana Ruiz, among others.

## Nonmodern

Having just traced an avant-garde spectrum from *formal* and *political*, it should be apparent that there are other ways of approaching the avant-garde, ways that would cut a very different swath through the field of study. For example, if capitalism, cognition, or network theory, rather than formal and political, were the touchstones to which this study would constantly return; a different set of work, people, and events would be foregrounded, along with a different set of priorities and practices. The distinctions of formal or political are not inherent to the videogames, people, or events themselves, but are debatable ways of looking, thinking, and working with the avant-garde as a subject of study. Any work, event, or figure, could be examined formally, politically, or through some admixture. In this dissertation, I am taking on multiple practices of looking to accommodate for diversity within the avant-garde. To that end, I will say things like, "*Quilted Thought Organ* is a formal work," or, I will examine Dada through the lens of the political avant-garde. I do so to frame them in a specific way, which reveals and highlights certain qualities over others. Through omission, this commits a certain level of rhetorical violence to individual work and to figures, but it also allows for a richer and more diverse field to be drawn out. With the problematic in mind, a philosophy of the avant-garde must be established that affords more diverse and opposing approaches, beyond a formal and political binary. How can even more diverse

approaches to the avant-garde be opened up, approaches that are variously radical, complicit, narratological, and so on?

To explain and justify the diversity of various avant-gardes examined in this dissertation, I need to reference two opposing epistemes (the conscious and unconscious ways with which we structure our knowledge of the world), first. To grossly oversimplify: **modern** culture of the 18th to 20th centuries was constructed out of divisive **binaries**: present/past, moderns/ancients, fiction/fact, machine/man, individual/society, unconscious/conscious, mind/body, capitalism/socialism, work/leisure, and so on. The emergence of **postmodern** culture in the latter 20th century was defined by **hybridity**: fictions became facts as actors become presidents and children playing games were recast as soldiers-in-training. In 1983 at the Epcot Center Ronald Reagan noted: "Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing Space Invaders and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow's pilot."<sup>24</sup> "Culture" incorporated itself into "technoculture," in which man, machine, and world, are wired into a globally sprawling, yet bodily penetrating, and mentally invasive, superorganism as described by Marshal McLuhan. China emerged as an economic power by integrating late capitalism into the centralized power structure of communism.

The domain of postmodern art is *media*, the blending of mediums. The domain of Modern art is the individual *medium*: the uniqueness of each medium manifested in the great Film, Painting, and for the modernists among us, the great Videogame. Modernism advanced a positive purity; it demands mediums realize their true essential selves, stripping away the dross of external referentiality. The modern paradigm demands each individual realize himself, discover objective truth, fight for her country, and so on. Postmodernism advances a negative purity; it

demands that we deny the existence of mediums, deny the viability of art, of the liberal human subject, objective truth, the exceptional greatness of a nation, and so on. All postmodern “art” is inescapably pulled into a social context on par with everything else. Every artwork and event can only be judged according to how it transforms, or critiques, that universal system of meaning and power. There is only one medium left, the great text, according to the poststructural critic and corporation alike. The most prolific “postmodern artist” is capitalism itself as every *thing*: “man,” “machine,” “nature,” DNA, asteroids, and so on, are mashed together into selfsame fodder for multinationals to manipulate like so many bits in a simulation.

But how postmodern are we? Don’t modernist divisions still dominate many aspects of contemporary life? In American politics culture clashes are fueled by a dominant “us versus them” mentality that structures thinking for both the “left” and “right.” If we really believe that there is an “us” (whom we like and identify with) and a “them” (whom we dislike and define ourselves in opposition to), if we believe there really is a political “left” and “right,” or a metaphysical “right” and “wrong,” we are to that degree, *modern*, in categorical terms. As Paul Feyerabend noted in *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, and talks, provocative in title alone, “How to Defend Society Against Science,” the most fascinating religious zealot today is not the Bible-pounding preacher, but his mirrored image—the proof-pounding atheist who proselytizes scientific Truth as the final word on reality.<sup>25</sup> Motivated atheists on the left are somewhat like modern-day witch-hunters, inflamed by the screeds of Christopher Hitchens and Dawkins, ridiculing the faithful as the evilest, and most foul of creatures. And of course, zealots mirror Hitchens and Dawkins, inciting majorities to fear the Other, using wedge issues of nationalism, immigration, race, and gender.

Just as modern and postmodern currents both define mainstream culture, so they define the videogame community. The videogame community disputes whether videogames are in essence: fun, pedagogic, rhetorical, political, narrative, procedural, rhetorical, commercial products, the latest iteration of traditional games, and so on. These modern battles are fought as if the history of art and media never happened. Sometimes it seems as if we are standing in front of a Frank Stella painting in 1959 all over again. The difference is that we are not arguing over whether some irregular shaped canvases are ruining or revolutionizing Painting, now it is over videogames. On the other hand, many in our community are postmodern. Bits and pieces of Aristotle's *Poetics* or Greenberg's essentialisms are thrown around in reference to contemporary media as if cultural and technological histories and contexts make no difference. Clive Barker wishes everything to be art—even bowel movements, as Ebert chides.

As a community, we are neither modern nor postmodern but both. We are not really in a modern era, or a postmodern era. We are in (and have been in) an era that is both modern and postmodern, a time Latour calls nonmodern or amodern. Any theory of videogames as media, entertainment, or as art must account for this fact if it is to be contemporary. To try to overwrite these contradictions, to collapse videogames on only one side or the other, is to advocate either modern purity (originality, individual, genius, truth, human mastery over machine) or postmodern "purity" (endless circulation, denial of the new, end of art, individual as illusion, machine as our idiot master). Either choice is a partisan hope of dominating the future by whitewashing the present. Standing amongst moderns and postmoderns, the natural thing to do is take sides. To prevent this kind of othering, I use the term "our community," "us," "we," and the like, in an awkwardly inclusive way throughout this dissertation. I do so hoping to interpellate the reader and myself, into a framework that is inclusive. We will hopefully identify with a series of self-

differing, even oppositional, subjects.

The two main epistemes cannot accept the other because they are opposed: one is about articulating divisions and the other is about obliterating divisions through networks and hybrids. There is unity and closure in taking a single side because your mandate and community becomes clear. If you refuse to permanently take sides (while taking sides temporarily), as I advocate, the framework must both support divisions and dissolve divisions, accepting hybrids in one moment and denying hybrids in the next. The way I have dealt with this problem is to treat the avant-garde *serially*, through chapters that oppose one another in their goals, tools, perspectives, and often, in their communities. But before we examine what that means, let's first consider the simpler fact of what it means to take sides.

The popular side to take, according to cultural academics, is the postmodern one. The appropriate task is to describe videogames contextually within their technocultural milieu. We should attack modernists and formalists for being ahistorical and out of touch with the latest, hip episteme (hybrids rule, it's the end of the human, nature is culture) poised to dominate. However, if we are limited to postmodern readings that begin with culture and end with culture, when we reach into "videogames," we soon discover a recursive loop: videogames are socially constructed, but also, in part, construct society. There are intriguing methods to trace the loop from a cultural studies perspective. These involve how identity politics or convergence culture plays out in gamer culture, as demonstrated by Henry Jenkins in his fan studies. Another strategy is that of the "subjective ethnographer" who adopts a complicit role within the group of her study. Celia Pearce's adopts such a strategy with virtual communities, exemplified in her book, *Communities of Play*. Crafting a culturally determined kind of formalism in



*Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin analyze videogames according to how they remediate other media such as film.

The least honest choice from a cultural studies view, but the easiest choice in terms of churning out articles, talks, and books, is also the most popular: take the modern side, but be populist about it. This strategy advocates videogames do have an essential form whether it is games, procedurality, narrative, or fun. This approach provides blinders allowing author and reader to fiddle together in neat, abstract classifications and ignore disruptive cultural, historical, political, or economic contexts. This approach includes the Platonic, pure formal, approach (appealing to ludology) and the Aristotelian, poetic formal, approach (appealing to narratology).

The most difficult choice is to be both historical and contemporary, to be nonmodern or amodern. What is the avant-garde in this view? What is art? If we accept Dissanayake's definition of art as "making special," the avant-garde, historically and currently, asks how, what, and why, we are making certain things special. Why not other things? Why not in other patterns? The avant-garde diverges from today's technocultural entertainment, as it diverged from official art, historically. For an avant-garde to be contemporary, it would have to be incredibly varied to work through the videogame field, because the technocultural networks and matrices that constitute that field do so in a variety of ways. How can we describe a videogame avant-garde without collapsing multiplicity into a false, ideal uniformity? How can we avoid pure hybridity (postmodernism), on the one hand, and pure categories (modernism), at the same time? By writing about the subject in an open and exploratory way, the can of worms, can hopefully, be a little spread out.

## Open Theory

Roland Barthes signaled the “Death of the Author,” back in 1967. But the author is still alive and kicking in academic literature. How can critics place themselves in alterity to their subject of study? Let’s say, for example, that I am a postmodernist (who only adores ironic and cynical art, for example), but a postmodernist who understands the modern. How could I speak of the modern as it presents itself to moderns, rather than how it presents itself to me, a devout postmodernist? How can a critic change her manner of looking at a subject according to her present position, as she traverses a field? How can a critic avoid forcing her subject of study to orbit the centrality of her personal episteme? Or, serve her partisan politics? Or, cater to her formal tastes? It bears repeating: How can a critic place herself in alterity to her subject of study? We can’t of course, at least not entirely, but we might, at least, try to crack ourselves open, and let some of that authorial life leak out into the subject. Let the theory squirm around some. Let it have a life of its own. Let it affect us, as we comb over the field. We can turn to a stratagem of the historical literary avant-garde for a handy pry.

Umberto Eco, critic, semiotician, novelist, among other things, advanced the idea of the “open work” or “loose work,” to describe artworks that do not need to deliver dramatic, aesthetic, or logical closure. In the preface, I used Ebert as a foil to pick apart the issue of artists enabling people who receive or play with artworks to configure them as they experience it. This openness cedes a measure of control from the author and gives it to chance, and to the reader, player, or performer, and that is the point. For Eco, the “‘open’ work tends to encourage ‘acts of conscious freedom’ on the part of the [reader, player, or] performer and place him at the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations, among which he chooses to set up his own

form.”<sup>26</sup> While this openness is framed in reference to art, there is no reason that it could not also apply to theory.

The reader is a kind of player when reading a theory that is open. In terms of art, Eco advised, that the “important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process.”<sup>27</sup> The authority of the author is divided and offered up in part to the reader, who can more meaningfully adopt multiple roles within the same text, and then make decisions as to which practices and perspectives might be more resonant than others. This plasticity through fracture is especially appropriate given the nature of videogames. Like the conventions or physics of a videogame, open theory is not devoid of structure. The structure I provide is a core argument presented in the introduction and preface, which is then fractured and split among a handful of avant-gardes, which comprise the following chapters. There could be more, and they could have been written differently—a blasphemous thing to say in an academic culture that advances the myth of the auteur theorist. Why must theory adhere to Roger Ebert’s antiquation of the paternal, godly auteur? Openness and contingency helps draw out an underlying point. Rather than an arbitrary affordance, openness exposes and offers up, in the world of theory, what Eco saw as key affordance in the realm of art: “These poetic systems recognize ‘openness’ as the fundamental possibility of the contemporary artist or consumer.”<sup>28</sup> Let’s trace some of the enclosures in which games are bound and authorized to be read by the academic community, and consider what we might gain by opening these up.

## *Opening the Theory of Avant-garde Videogames*

Videogames have not been comprehensively studied as an avant-garde project that is itself open to internal opposition and divergence. The few cases that seriously discuss videogames in correlation with the historical or contemporary avant-garde are either modern (only specific kinds of formal work are valid), or postmodern (“art,” “design,” “politics,” “critique,” “intervention,” all dominate all the time). Videogames in these examples are reduced to serve either the author’s political ideals or her formalist tastes. We shouldn’t allow taste or personal politics to unnecessarily restrict a study about exposing and challenging our rituals and procedures.

Mary Flanagan’s book, *Critical Play*, is a noteworthy and important artifact in the history of game studies and art, especially its analysis of board games. However, its approach is constricted in a critical way. I use her book in this example because Flanagan invokes the avant-garde as she introduces her subject: “*Critical Play* is the first book to examine alternative games, and use such games as models to propose a theory of avant-garde game design.”<sup>29</sup> *Critical Play* is not unusual, at least within game studies, in that it conforms the subject to a singular viewpoint and frame. It accepts a common misconception as its foundation: videogames are reducible to semiotic inscription/reception, to be couched in the popular catchphrase of expression, “*Critical Play* is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Artists using games as a *medium of expression*.”<sup>30</sup> The phrase “medium of expression” positions the *idea* as primary and the *medium* in which ideas are supposedly carried, as a secondary support. Moreover, it constructs a binary understanding of medium as both divisible from, and subservient to, an already-created idea just awaiting its delivery.

This hierarchy is so rooted in contemporary thought that it provides the foundation of U.S. copyright law.<sup>31</sup> The collapse of art into expression has been resisted as hegemonic, through a multitude of alternate strategies of artists and critics over the past century. Clement Greenberg advised painting not be limited to literary criticism, to becoming a “stooge of literature” (ludologists have said nearly the same of games, but then reject Greenberg’s second caveat that a painting doesn’t need to be reduced into expressions or social critique. Ludology is comfortable with semiotics but not narrative, apparently). In a more direct opposition to the popular move that Flanagan makes, Susan Sontag argued “against interpretation” with art, rejecting the idea that art must essentially be a carrier for an idea, or reducible to an expression.

Flanagan constricts her frame of avant-garde art in another dimension as well. Form is first reduced to a text, but then as text it is restrained according to its readability as political force:

Artists practicing intervention often have social or political goals, and often seek to open up dialogue [...] With the exception of purely aesthetic movements (abstract expressionism comes to mind), most twentieth century art movements fostered interventionist activities and strategies, particularly those identified as the avant-garde. Numerous twentieth century avant-garde artists had the shared goal of bringing about private and public transformation through creative acts. Thus some artistic intervention takes the form of performance, parody, simulation, game, activist, and “hactivist” strategies.<sup>32</sup>

By only foregrounding the political aspects of these videogames, Flanagan places

formal aspects into the background. For example, she disregards Greenberg's seminal essay on the avant-garde: "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in which Greenberg argues for an aesthetic avant-garde that is specifically *not concerned* with social issues, an avant-garde that should not be evaluated according to interventionist, or activist strategies. Although some artists do revel in these roles, not all of them feel they must play teacher, liberator, and visionary. If the avant-garde is evaluated exclusively for its political force, culturally important formal avant-garde efforts are negated. If we can be more historically inclusive, less partisan and less ideal, we may understand that formal videogame works can be appreciated in ways that deviate from hegemonic demands of "social critique," interventions of social justice, or pedagogic authorial expression.

The politically inclined reader might still ask: what does an open approach, one that accounts for many kinds of politics and many kinds of forms, really offer? Why not accept the politically radical position as the correct one, as media theorists after Walter Benjamin would have us do, and which Flanagan is a contemporary advocate? Why not claim from the outset that all media is inescapably political in its production, consumption, recirculation, and remediation? The simple answer is that from an entirely politicized position, the articulated nature of formal practice lives within a blind spot that cannot be sufficiently appreciated. Formal practice is usually discussed according to individual experience. Political practice is usually discussed as social experience. The complicated answer is that if politics dictates all "acceptable" positions, our understanding of what a radical politics might even mean with regard to videogames, is itself critically weakened. Flanagan's study hybridizes: "art," "design," "politics," "critique" and "intervention" all the way through. The result is that they all dominate all the time. None of them can ever fully dominate and establish its unique focus or shapely force. If we adopt a serial

approach, we can see more clearly what each avant-garde can do. We need diversity in our theory of avant-garde videogames so we do not eliminate differences. If we can accept certain categories and divisions we will be able to appreciate divergence within the avant-garde, and may then understand its multi-threaded approach. We will be able to appreciate even more interesting hybrids than a flatly collapsed: art-design-political-critique-intervention.

An oversimplification, but let's surmise that the problem lies in a peculiarity of artistic practice itself. Formal practice left to its own devices breaks down and reconstructs videogames in ways unavailable to politically-steeped minds. Formal practice does not need to prove its transformative social effect every step of the way, or in any step, if it wishes. If formal practice is allowed to stumble around according to its own devices, it can trigger political elements that actually remain hidden from overtly political examination and "critique." Formal practice plays with experience and being. It is more playful of individual experience than politically oriented practice. It can either use or ignore demands that are textual, social justice based, rhetorical, humanist, and so on. Form can be uncannily radical as it aggravates and illuminates the blur between "human" and nonhuman. In these ways, formal art can be more "political" than overtly political art.

The reverse argument is true. Political art can be more "formal" than formal art. If we entertain the idea that the artistic "medium" of political art is society itself, then the "form" of political art is more expansive than formal art. Its "genres" are debunking ideology or false consciousness, restructuring power, redistributing the sensible, or energizing the mass so its forces can circulate and organize beyond the affordances of government or capital. The political position's "formal" strength arises from its obsessional focus in folding and restructuring the social fabric of

technoculture. Modern painters, according to Greenberg, could experiment more intently with form, color, texture, and shape, because concerns regarding representation in painting could slip, as could concerns of patronage or fame as the artists can still work in poverty and obscurity—Van Gogh being a favorite example. Conversely, politically grounded artists can be “formally” experimental in ways formal artists could never imagine. Political artists intently work the social fabric of media in remarkable ways because they allow aesthetic concerns, and individual experience to slip. Consider the griever “event” (the unit of the political artist) as a “work” (the unit of the formal artist). The social fabric of media takes on new imaginative shapes as grievers conduct “formal” experiments with digital capital and its rituals of power. Grievers generate monstrous aesthetic patterns rippling through technocultural networks—incorporating digital commerce, mass assumptions regarding representation, race, and so on, into their works. If we can, for the moment, conceptually reduce people and social values as artistic “material” to manipulate, then grievers are some of the most sophisticated and relevant “formal” artists working today. The point is that by accepting categories we can eventually reach even more useful and interesting hybrids.

Alexander Galloway’s *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* is more formal in its treatment of games than Flanagan’s politically (critically and pedagogically) oriented, *Critical Play*. However, Galloway still falls short of appreciating formal works as avant-garde videogames because he is unable to sufficiently deviate from his own tastes of what constitutes a “good” formal work. Where Flanagan limits her politics to progressive battles, Galloway’s limits his formal aesthetics to mainstream game design. Galloway writes that avant-garde games such as those made by Jodi, Oliver, and Brody Condon serve “to hinder gameplay, not advance it. It eclipses the game as a game and rewrites it as a sort of primitive animation lacking any of the



virtues of game design. [...] We need an avant-garde of video gaming not just in visual form but also in actional form. We need radical gameplay, not just radical graphics.”<sup>33</sup> Galloway is one of the most considerate supporters of a formal avant-garde but he falters at a crucial point.<sup>34</sup> It is the point at which the art outstrips the theory, and the theory must do unexpected work to adapt and catch up to the leaps and bounds that the work is doing. The videogames by Jodi and Condon do advance gameplay in radical ways. They expand the medium beyond where we (including, apparently, sophisticated game academics, such as Galloway) comfortably wish to contain them. The games he examines offer radical gameplay, but it is gameplay beyond the familiar flow patterns. They are all immanently playable, and replayable *as videogames*. They simply demand extra effort to comprehend them as such because their form is so alien from what we expect when we play.

The term “avant-garde” is, apparently, simultaneously too pliable and too stable. Like a pile of dough, it is rolled up, pounded and shaped by authors a bit too easily. By cutting through it at different angles, as I propose to do in each chapter, hopefully, it might harden into smaller chunks. Though fracture, the avant-garde might be able to conform to a multiplicity of epistemes and a diverse set of practices. Although it is hardened to single view in each chapter, the gap, or opposition, between views reinvests the concept with a useful instability. We can aggregate individual perspectives, like those of Flanagan and Galloway, among others, into a larger, heterogeneous framework. Together, the framework comprises a kaleidoscopic vision of the videogame avant-garde. The term, “videogame avant-garde,” should afford diverging epistemes without collapsing its subjects into a world that is only formal, political, complicit, or narrative. Avant-gardes past and present wander down the same shifting mazes, but are stumbling in different

directions and speeds. It is too intimate or too alienating, too new or too old. The avant-garde is critical, expressive, and politically progressive, as Flanagan assumes, but it is also divergent in other ways invisible to her station. Moving around with the avant-gardes, we can feel it moving faster or slower than we wish for as individual critics, perhaps moving at a cultural speed that is too unfamiliar to appreciate from one formal perspective, or through the lens of one political ideology.

If we allow our vision to fracture, to take in the whole avant-garde videogame project, we can see that if we are able to determine avant-garde cultural value from grieving, we are not precluded to appreciating subtler maneuvers by artists like Natalie Bookchin or Jason Rohrer, the latter of which, grievers might mock as being utterly self-important and serious and making games that reflect these predilections. In fact, we can appreciate them in more meaningful ways because what the alternate ways have revealed. Expanding our view in time, formalist freaks and bores seem more attractive and viable after experiencing a griever attack, especially the more sophisticated griever “performances” by Gazira Babeli. The formal, political, radical, and complicit avant-gardes are all willfully or unwittingly working together. The more oppositional to, or divergent from, one another they are, the stronger the avant-garde is as a field. The videogame avant-garde is not a single entity. It is not evolving according to some pseudo-Darwinian principle. It is not a linear progression or series of revolutions. It has no hardcore group or single manifesto, but many groups and beliefs, similar to the diversity of the avant-garde historically and contemporaneously from other media. If there is a core, it is technoculture itself, from which the avant-garde feeds upon, even as it seems to ignore it, or as it attacks it, or seduces it through complicity. Technocultural entertainment is the “art establishment” on which it turns. Popular technoculture

provides the armature, material, conventions, and form with which it exaggerates, unworks, and plays. To try to see a videogame avant-garde as a single entity is analogous to trying to see a singular, smooth representation in a cubist painting, or to achieve flow while playing a game by Jodi—the more nonmodern (both postmodern and modern) you are, the easier that might be.

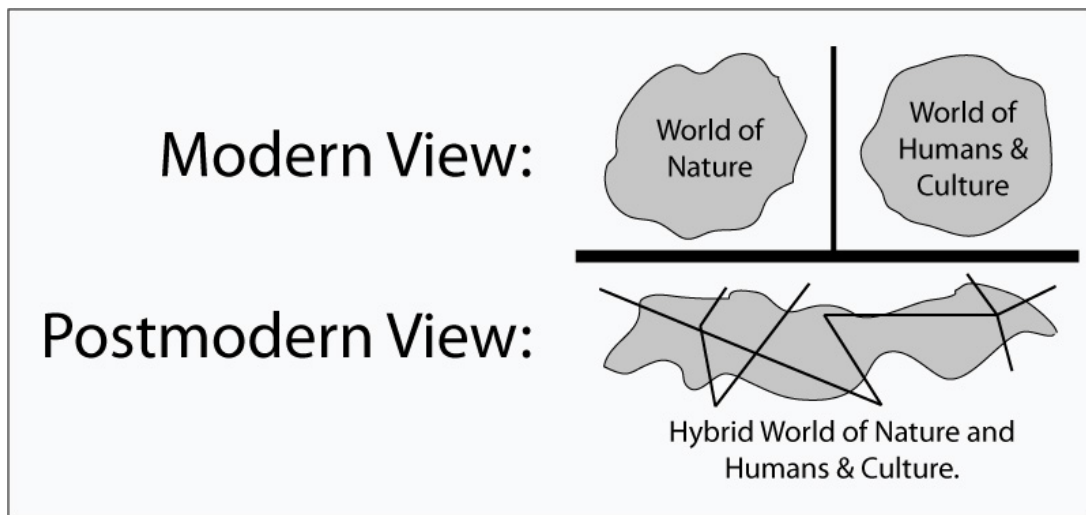


Figure 1-14 The modern episteme is based on divisions, whereas the postmodern episteme is based on hybridity and networks (this is a simplification of Latour's diagram).

Bruno Latour provides a theoretical architecture in *We Have Never Been Modern*, which we can use to structure and make sense of our understanding of the videogame avant-garde. In contemporary culture, it is apparent that categories, labels, specialties, and disciplines abound. However, the proliferation of so many specialties and disciplines of knowledge belie the fact that the categories are themselves becoming weaker all the time. Monstrous hybrids proliferate and grow, subsuming our fences as fast as they are constructed. In a somewhat quaint example, Latour considers the newspaper:

Headings like Economy, Politics, Science, Books, Culture, Religion and Local Events remain in place as if there were nothing odd going on. The smallest AIDS virus takes you from sex to the unconscious, then to Africa, tissue cultures, DNA and San Francisco, but the analysts, thinkers, journalists and decision-makers will slice the delicate network traced by the virus for you into tidy compartments where you will find only science, only economy, only social phenomena, only local news, only sentiment, only sex.<sup>35</sup>

Ostensibly “objective” categories ring false from a postmodern perspective.

However, such divisions are, counter-intuitively, the best way to manifest the richest and most hybridized visions of culture. The more divisions we have, the more hybrid technoculture becomes. In other words, the most efficient way to actually become “postmodern” is to demand that we be “modern.” If that is not enough, the reverse is also true: the best way to remain modern is to demand that we be “postmodern.” In other words, the best way to prevent the growth of hybrids is to deny the categorization of things, “To put it crudely: those who think most about hybrids circumscribe them as much as possible, whereas those who choose to ignore them [by distinguishing categories] develop them the utmost.”<sup>36</sup> Premoderns and postmoderns alike choose to ignore them, and are therefore stuck in hybridity.

Latour distinguishes between “moderns” and “premoderns.”

Anthropologists describe premodern culture as caught up in a fluid hybridity. The caveman is a comical postmodernist: a rustling in the bushes might release a flurry of associations about dead angry ancestors, taboos broken, dangers, and so on. Premoderns cannot make a meaningful, solid distinction (even “false” distinction) between nature and culture, physical world and social world subject and object. In reality, distinctions are made all the time; the dichotomy of insider versus outsider,

for example, is far older than culture, and is replicated across species, such as wolves identifying with a pack. But even a basic distinction of insider versus outsider is undermined in the premodern world. What about the gods? What about the spirits of the dead? What about our dogs? Divisions are undermined by backdoors and slippages of all types, often through magical thinking, as in contagious magic or imitative magic, described by anthropologist, Sir James Frazer. There is a popular fantasy that sees the premodern world as dynamic and riveted with vitality. Avant-garde figures like Picasso succumbed to this fantasy, when he fetishized African art as more powerful or primal than other art traditions.

The fantasy of romantics on the premodern is misguided. Premoderns are in many ways stuck, not in a dynamic world, but in a static world because there are no boundaries. Without “objective” constants with which to gain sufficient bearings, one cannot abstract the world sufficiently to see it as fungible. Premoderns could never have seen the world with the totalizing eye that the moderns have summoned, who see themselves and the world as a giant ball of clay to conquer and shape in the name of science, liberal democracy, and so on. This is because premoderns could not first divide the world into categories:

The premoderns are all monists in the constitution of their nature-cultures. ‘The native [...] is forever tying threads, unceasingly turning over all the aspects of reality, whether physical, social or mental [...] By saturating the mixes of divine, human and natural elements with concepts, the premoderns limit the practical expansion of these mixes.’<sup>37</sup>

Latour concludes, the “less moderns think they are blended, the more they blend. The more science is absolutely pure, the more it is intimately bound up with the

fabric of society.” If we only deny the dualisms of past/present, social/natural, man/machine, and so on, then we are encased in a postmodern scandal in which no alterity, and in many cases, no reality, actually exists. This is where Baudrillard has positioned himself, in which the great simulation of technoculture predetermines all, and avant-garde actions are impossible or infantile. In a pure postmodern world, all we can do is, “sleep till the end of the millennium,” as Baudrillard put it, and just maybe, perhaps learn to “dream critically,” if we insist on still living, acting, and thinking. If we only accept the meta-dualism of modern/postmodern, then we are unable to comprehensively engage contemporary technoculture. Latour needed to move back and forth between modern divides and postmodern hybridity, as well as dwell in each of them serially, so he constructed a means of doing so. If we are to map out our current situation in games, we may use a congruent strategy. The best way to let go of the modernist and postmodernist impulse in the study and play of games is to accept them both, becoming nonmodern or amodern. The videogame avant-garde is presented here with a centerless field of divergent views in mind. It is a gameboard of theory that allows for various theories and approaches of the avant-garde to play out in ways that are modern as well as postmodern.

## A Field of Approaches to Avant-garde Videogames

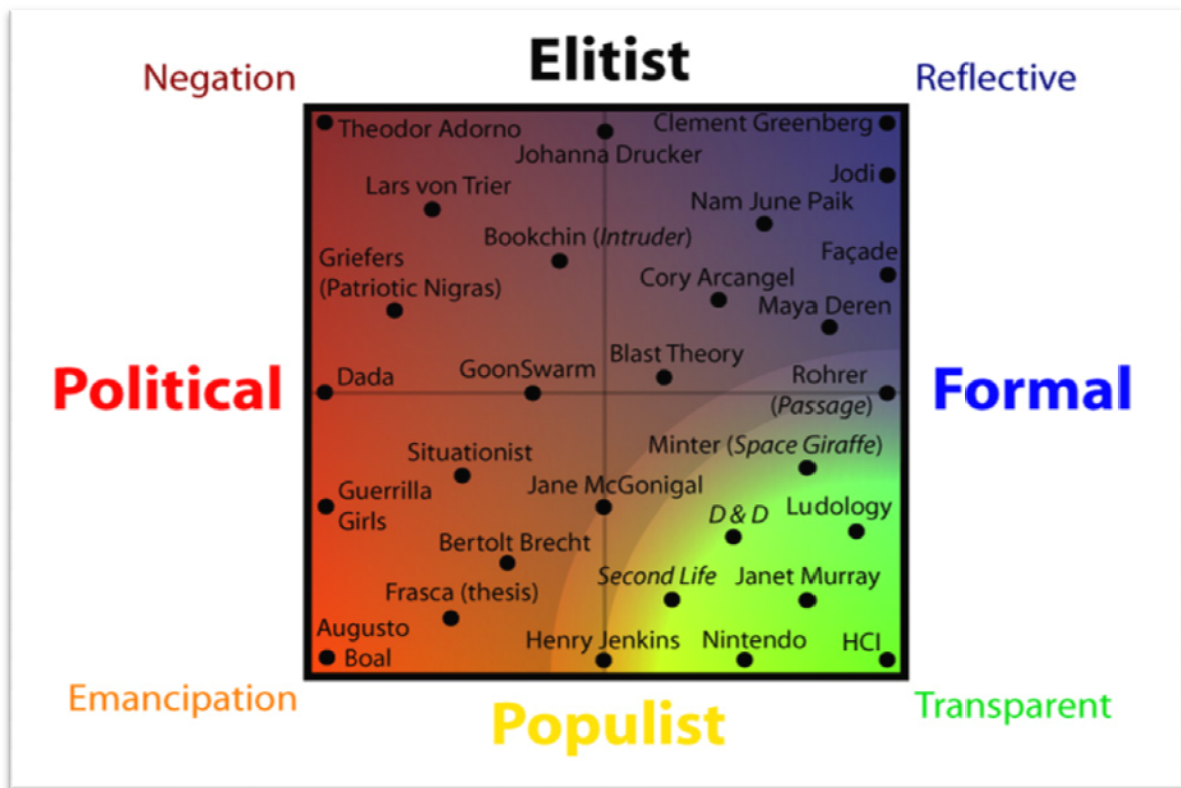


Figure 1-15 If we imagine “avant-garde videogames” as a spread out field of approaches allows for the concept to diverge in myriad ways.

This field foregrounds the fact that the avant-garde is structured out of its own diversity, rather than according to a singular ideal. It is a gameboard with which to role-play various theories and practices, to imagine yourself as another person, or in a community that might be alien to you. Reflecting on it, you can dwell in an area, compare it to another area, or skate across the surface and see what connections between works and figures arise. Figures come from the game community, avant-garde, entertainment industry, and academia, to further emphasize the diversity of the field. The horizontal axis presents a dimension of approaches that ranges from the extremely political and to extremely formal. The

vertical axis presents a range of communities involved in these practices, ranging from elitist or specialist at the top, to populist or generalist toward the bottom. The four corners: reflective, transparent, emancipatory, negation, describe what the communities focus on and desire from within their own quadrant. The field itself is incomplete, open, and contingent. It favors ways of looking that seem to resonate with the work, events, and figures that populate this study. It could be redrawn according to other criteria, such as capitalism, cognition, network theory, etc., as mentioned earlier, rather than according to form and politics.

### *The Formal Dimension*

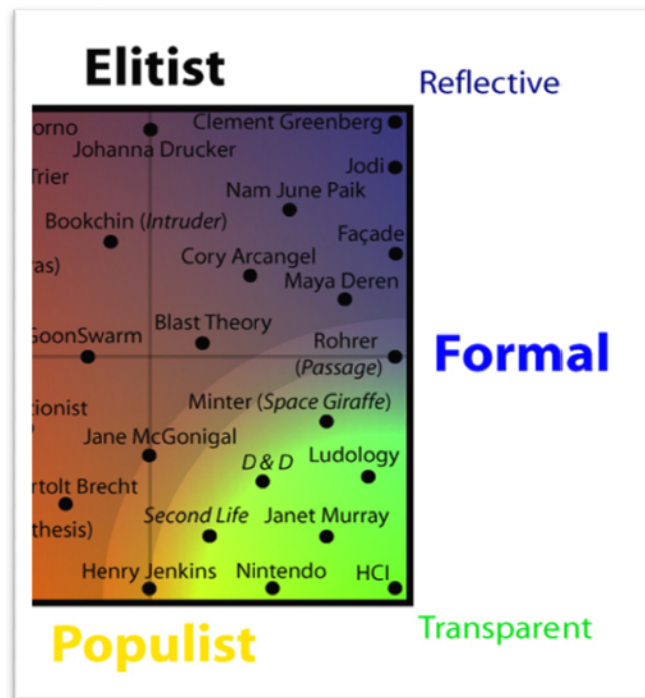


Figure 1-16 The right side of the diagram presents a field of more formal approaches.

In the far right side of the field moves the radically formal world where issues of politics might be considered a distraction. From Clement Greenberg to scientists of Human Computer Interaction or Human Centered Computing, the focus is on



exploring the nature of people's experiences of art and media. The work and figures on the right side of the field concentrate on learning and manipulating the rules of engagement, but they do so for different purposes, represented along a vertical spectrum. At the extreme bottom right the focus is on streamlining people's experience of media. People are reframed as "users," and media reframed as "technology," rather than an artistic medium, for example. User experience is ideally transparent, subservient to efficient and safe uses of products. Industry, efficiency, service, affordability, sustainability, and so on, order the rules of engagement.

A diverse peppering of figures is scattered across the vertical dimension on the right. At the top right corner, the community has specialized or elite training, interest, or knowledge. This includes all types of specialists or elite: hardcore gamers with intimate knowledge and experience of certain videogame genres to art historians and critics who are schooled in complex and diverse traditions of art. For Greenberg at the top right, the "user" is recast as a "cultural agent" who is able to independently enrich her tastes, and work towards enlightenment, through direct contact with difficult and novel art forms. Since the viewer is respected as autonomous, she should not be seduced by art, or media, into seeing herself as an efficient and empowered user of media technology, as HCI would have her. Instead, the viewer should be allowed to appreciate the art's form, to strongly sense the support technologies, rules, and conventions, as they are, not how we would like them to be. Stuff might break, the flow fall apart, but that is good and interesting because it reveals something about the nature of experience itself, rather than getting something done, or simulating getting something done. The viewer is respected as an agent with the capacity to frame the experience, and derive force or meaning from it, according to her own ability and will. The medium's structure and form are vigorously reconfigured and experimented with by the artist. The more

elite that formal art is, the more it strives toward the impossible things. Slavoj Žižek notes that each modern artwork sublimely “hurts” us in some new way, ruffling our organism in a dimension to which we were previously blind and senseless—could a better antithesis to HCI be found?<sup>38</sup>

### *The Political Dimension*



Figure 1-17 The left side of the diagram presents a field of politically inclined approaches.

The extreme left side of the diagram spreads across a radically politicized body of figures. Concerns over how power is structured socially, technologically and artificially, dominates thought, shaping courses of action. Redistributing or disrupting that power is the motivating desire. When these figures do have an explicit political philosophy, it is often a contemporary form of Marxism, or neo-Marxism. However, they also embody epistemes that are anarchistic, spiritual, or conservative. Historical iconoclasm against representation, for example, the

motivations behind religious commandments against representing God visually, orally, or textually, are oddly resonant in Anonymous and griefers cultures online.

Theodor Adorno on the top left wrote radiantly of the relationship between culture, politics, and aesthetics, for an elite academic audience. Not a romantic or Kantian spiritualist like Greenberg, Adorno's appreciation of aesthetics is based on negation. For Adorno the dulling effects of the culture industry could only be resisted, for example, by appreciating articulated, "difficult" music. Superficially, this sounds very much like Greenberg. But no divine sparks (nothing meaningful arising from outside of culture), were allowed to leak into Adorno's mind, as they did for Greenberg. A "purist" in the politically negative sense, Adorno saw everything under the sun as reducible to cultural politics, no other actors were allowed onstage. Augusto Boal on the bottom left gets his hands dirty traveling through Latin American barrios. It is not the high, difficult theory of Adorno, but it is practical steps people can take to contest, and reorder, the rituals in which they find themselves entrenched. Boal teaches the poor how to deflate, rethink, and transform, the oppression of their everyday situations by using theater as a learning device, as a means to actively experiment with various solutions, and as a means for communities to become collectively empowered and organized.

The political side of the field gets a little more complicated than the radical formal side. This is because even the most radical political approaches to art and media consider formal properties in some way. Boal understands the aesthetic forms of theater, but these are only important and operational in how they can critique or repattern the flow of power in social life. It is the inverse of art for art's sake. In a way, Boal is also a mirror image of HCI, but along a different vector than Modern art. Boal's art doesn't "hurt" (like Modern art), but at the same time, he doesn't

construct “users,” he doesn’t worry about smooth, safe usage, or hide conventions (like HCI). Boal reveals the constructed nature of theater in such a way that overtly pressures people to act as agents that can transform their own social relations as they can a street play.

Once political figures on the left of the field begin ruminating over art for its own sake, you can imagine them sliding toward the formal side. For example, Johanna Drucker, in the top middle, hybridizes Adorno and Greenberg in a surprising way. Drucker imagines art as a way to challenge and reform everyday life, and that art does so not by being “critical” or through negation, but by affording novel formal pleasure. On the bottom middle lives Henry Jenkins, advocate of “convergence culture” and fan culture. Jenkins’s essential argument is that by remixing popular media in personally creative ways, people can transform society in a positive, participatory way. Not radically formal, nor radically political, but pulpy, soft, and entirely populist, his approach to new media studies is extremely popular in the press. For a bit of catnip, here Jenkins explicitly places popular design *above* art practice:

[Videogames] open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible. And games have been embraced by a public that has otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art. Much as the salon arts of the 1920s seemed sterile alongside the vitality and inventiveness of popular culture, contemporary efforts to create interactive narrative through modernist hypertext or avant-garde installation art seem lifeless and pretentious alongside the creativity and exploration, the sense of fun and wonder, that game designers bring to their craft.<sup>39</sup>

Again, Jenkins blasts the openness of art in order to hail the closure of great commercial design. Jenkins is a populist theorist in the same vein as Marshall McLuhan, who lives in the same place in the field as Jenkins, and who also wore the academic-who's-hip-with-technoculture mantle.

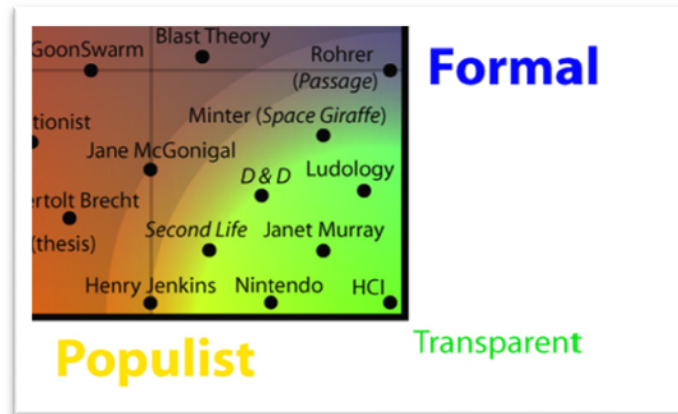


Figure 1-18 The lower right area of the field presents a cluster of approaches that produce, or value, transparency and flow in videogames—this the only area of the field that is not avant-garde.

The lower right quadrant of the field is the only area that is not avant-garde, but mainstream. This is because these approaches share an ideal. They believe that videogames should provide flow experiences. One advantage of distributing figures across a field in this way is that it affords mulling over approaches that are philosophical neighbors. Ludology and narratology are closely intimate in their mutual adoration of transparent and populist formalism. They both assume the flow ideal. The ludologists, in spite of their capricious “seriousness,” still have not taken their own formal arguments seriously enough. Not seriously enough to appreciate how the videogame form is diverging beyond the constraints of transparent consumption and flow. Not serious enough to discover all the interesting problems and opportunities historical formal artists of film, music, and painting pondered and

played with over the past century. On the other side, in the political realm, there has been much discussion on the socially transformative power of videogames, but this is often limited to progressive politics, or vague concepts of “democratization.” What about the politics of nonhuman actors, where are they represented in the popular rhetoric of democratization?

An advantage of the field is to discover where videogames have no representative players. There is no Greenberg of videogames, nor an Adorno. So we might imagine them and role-play. Sometimes, we discover another artist or critic already role-playing a part. There is an Augusto Boal (lower left) of videogames in Gonzalo Frasca. When playing through that part we already have a navigator and copilot to take over some of the duties. Moreover, we can play the role a bit differently, using a different style of play. Through that contrast, we might learn something about how populist avant-garde politics can play out in divergent ways in games.

This is a non-dialectical philosophy of the avant-garde. There is no final synthesis or resolution. Formal and political strategies are both viable, even as they challenge or ignore the other, or blend together, in various ways. I am trying to be careful not to reduce the avant-garde to service my private political peculiarities or formal tastes, but, of course, I will still omit many approaches that deserve to be accounted for, but are not. To play with and flesh out these arguments does not mean to choose a superior range of topics for the videogame avant-garde. The goal is to see what can happen in this field, to understand what’s going in it individually and collectively. Rather than author a nonmodern Constitution, as Latour does in *We Have Never Been Modern*, I will settle for a divergent and fractured description of the field.

It will help to provide, if not a nonmodern Constitution, a thread to connect the chapters and players into one multifaceted frame. The avant-garde is becoming increasingly relevant, not less so. This is because of a trend within technoculture itself. Art theorist, Krzysztof Ziarek, claims:

The importance of the avant-garde is its refiguration of experience which is open to the future and transformation, and as such, irreducible to representations and significations given to it. The question is not how to overcome the divide between art and experience but how to rethink and contest experience itself, how to address the inessentiality of each instant, its contradictoriness, which disappears in the increasingly technological schema of being.<sup>40</sup>

Videogames in their popular form reduce representation and condense action. They render each moment essential, like a string of pearls. Players experientially flow from one bright spot to the next. Yet, videogames are also the richest and most dynamic domain in which the world is schematized and totalized into a singular matrix of information and activity. McKenzie Wark fleshes out the concept in *Gamer Theory*: “You are a gamer whether you like it or not, now that we all live in a gamespace that is everywhere and nowhere. As Microsoft says: *Where do you want to go today?* You can go anywhere you want in gamespace but you can never leave it.”<sup>41</sup>

Wark summarizes our present condition: “The game has not just colonized reality, it is also its sole remaining ideal.” If this is the case, then it situates videogames as the principle site for a loose crowd of avant-garde figures to open up

and explore alterities of being and of experience in contemporary life. Trajectories diverge along various forms, politics, and narratives, and so on, but the videogame avant-garde always manages to play with alterity in some way. Individually, they work over facets of our mediated reality, but collectively, they expose and reimagine the constructed nature of technoculture itself. They play with the things that don't exist—that is, don't exist according to our cultural rituals and computer algorithms. The avant-garde allows us unwork power, to exist, even if momentarily, within a logic that is neither dominating or agonistic, nor submissive or instrumental. What mood, what modality is more foreign to gamespace than this? The status quo of videogames is so reductive and conservative it is almost too easy to be avant-garde.



## Chapter Overviews

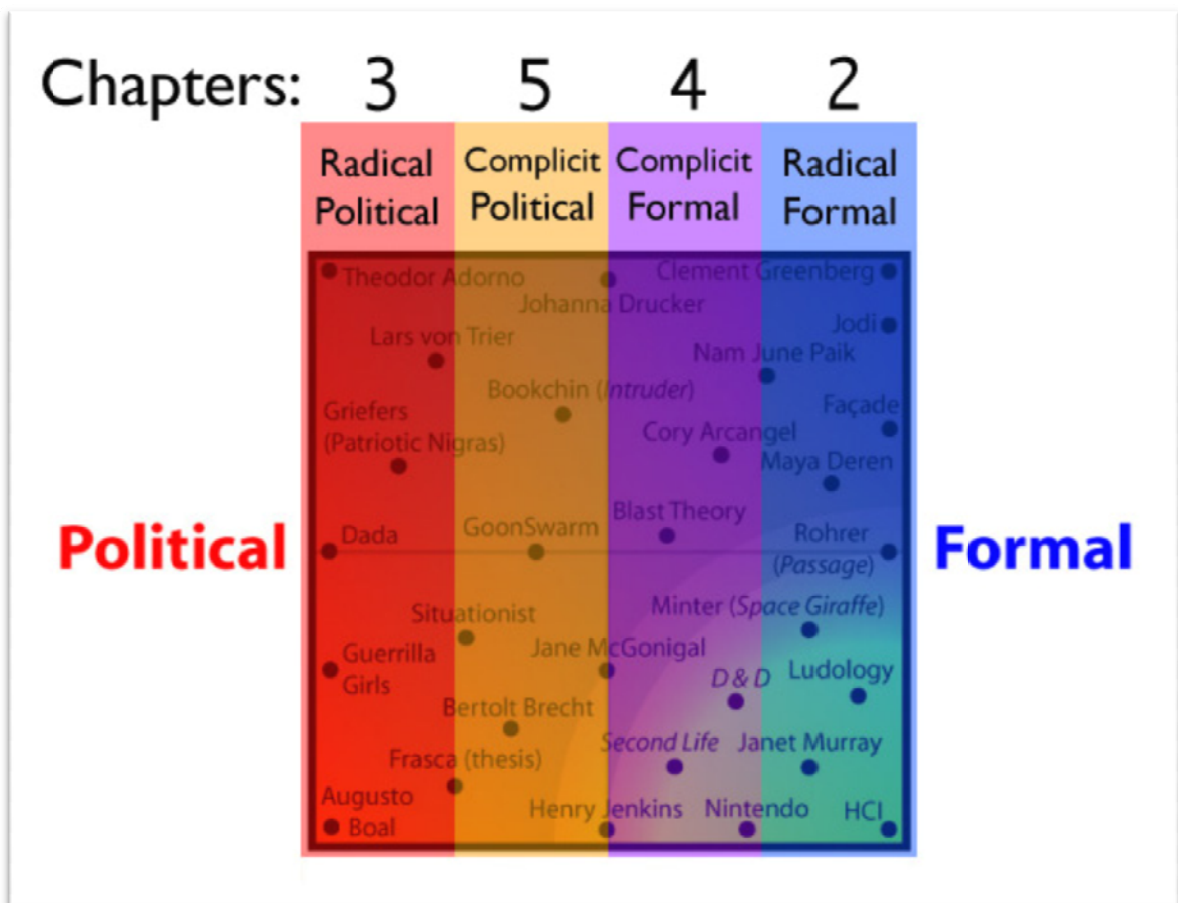


Figure 1-19 The following four chapters will examine four columns of the field: 2) Radical Formal; 3) Radical Political; 4) Complicit Formal; and 5) Complicit Political.

### *Chapter 2: Radical Formal: Play Beyond Flow*

A popular ideal in the videogame community is to design games and to desire gameplay that put players into the zone or flow.<sup>42</sup> In simple terms, flow is “optimal experience,” according to psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Although, all game developers don’t use the exact word, “flow,” it is a given that permeates the industry. Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as a dynamic balancing based on a person’s constantly shifting horizon of skill, focus, and interest. Flow is

“a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted.”<sup>43</sup> The radical formal avant-garde plays with the form of a medium that makes it unique from other mediums. By isolating and manipulating a medium’s form, artists and critics push the medium beyond its conventional uses within technocultural entertainment—which for videogames is *flow*. To play with a formalist work is to sense its infrastructure, how the game was constructed. The individual’s experience breaches boundaries of semiotic understanding and resists interpretation.

The term “medium” is everywhere in videogame studies and implies something beyond material support: “storytelling medium,” “expressive medium,” “medium of communication,” “videogame medium,” but an explicit formal definition that attends to this implication has not been offered by writers who use such terms (Janet Murray, Mary Flanagan, Alexander Galloway, Gonzalo Frasca, Espen Aarseth, Celia Pearce, Jesper Juul, Ian Bogost, and so on). Several formal definitions exist in the history of art theory, however. I aggregate these within one frame: an artistic medium is comprised of three formal supports: *material* technology, *sensual* affordances, and cultural *conventions*. This triad summary is a (gross) generalization and a synthesis of Clement Greenberg (medium as material), Michael Fried (medium as sense), and Rosalind Krauss (medium as convention), respectively. Formal experimentation, play, or critique, might occur within a single support or any combination thereof.

Summarizing a medium's genres and conventional supports in a single work, as in a large painting, helps advance the concept of Painting with a capital "P" — the cultural relevance and prominence of the artistic medium. This capitalization occurred with the rise of novelist Literature in the 19th century, with French Painting in the late 19th century, and eventually with Film in the 1950s and 60s, especially with the advent of Film Studies as an academic discipline. Before film culturally ascended into Film, film enthusiasts lamented that it could not be taken seriously like "Painting." This historical parallel helps to explain the "film envy" that afflicts the game community and suggests that games might pass beyond this phase. By looking inward, yet in the broadest ways possible, conventions across many game genres might be aggregated and condensed in order to help advance Videogames with a capital "V." Perhaps this will only occur when videogames stop being the latest new medium, and another new medium, steals the spotlight.

### *Chapter 3: Radical Political: Playing with Technoculture*

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga mischaracterized the magic circle. Huizinga constrained his examination of the magic circle through a modern lens that splits the world, separating play and work, real and unreal, sacred and mundane. According to anthropology, and within historical fiction, the magic circle actually blends worlds. For example, in *Doctor Faustus*, a 17th century play, the magic circle summons "real" scientific knowledge but also demonic threat and is a source of death. Huizinga's error has been propagated throughout videogame studies in which world designers are framed as paternalistic gods conjuring magical bubbles. Salen and Zimmerman offer a definition in *Rules of Play*, often cited in the videogame community: "Play is free movement within a more rigid structure."<sup>44</sup> To see play as contained movement is to look from the perspective of the ruling

structure, it is not to look from the perspective of play, nor is it to look from outside the bubble of the rigid structure. Play is then supposedly afforded by the grace of the design. Play is reduced to the movement of electrons in circuitry, a clinical, technocentric definition.

The radical political avant-garde recalls the premodern magic circle. They remind us that reality is in play, and that play requires “real” risk if it is to transform reality. They play with art and politics, fictions and everyday life, blending, and transforming, these categories in the process. Several founders of the Black Panthers arose from street theater in Harlem, such as the Black House.<sup>45</sup> Their highly stylized marches and protests were a form of avant-garde political theater. Regardless of their stated goal: “revolution,” etc., the Black Panthers accomplished something else. Suddenly, it was evident that blacks could transform their own placement and function in society, and did not need paternal support of whites, institutions, the government, or the church, to do so. The U.S. government understood that the Black Panthers were committing a symbolic form of violence through their political theater. “Pushing the Black Panther Party across the line from symbolic to literal violence was one of the main goals of COINTELPRO, an FBI program.”<sup>46</sup>

In 1999 *Toywar* emerged in two “worlds” simultaneously. The first was a “fictional” game and the other a “real” economic intervention. A billion-dollar toy retailer, eToys.com, threatened to sue the artist group, etoy, for trademark infringement. The retailer assumed that the etoy artists would submit to conventional power in one of two traditional ways: give up the intellectual property, or respond to legal claims with legal responses in the court system. etoy responded by drawing a magic circle called, *Toywar*, around themselves, the corporation, the market, and the news media. *Toywar* was an MMO in which players would try to

drive down the actual price of eToys's stock in the NASDAQ. An internal check system allowed players to compare, remix, and record public-relations stunts. eToys's continual triage of public reactions was tracked as well. A flurry of articles about *Toywar* appeared in national and local newspapers, from *The New York Times* to *Le Monde*. Within weeks of launching *Toywar*, the price of the eToys's stock was in freefall, the company eventually declaring bankruptcy. *Toywar* was "the most expensive performance in art history: \$4.5 billion dollars."<sup>47</sup> The radical political avant-garde expands the liminal field of play to draw technoculture into the magic circle. The do not blend worlds, but more so reveal how the "world" is already blended, and that play is inherently transformative of the world.

#### *Chapter 4: Complicit Formal: Gaming in the Cracks*

Where the radical formal avant-garde hones in on a single medium, the complicit formal avant-garde rejects medium-specificity. Its focus is diffused across media platforms. In fact, videogames are not a "medium" at all, but a commercial cluster of one big entangled technocultural mess. Where radical formalism digs down, seeking to expose forms, *complicit* formalism skates across categories. Humor becomes a social lubricant to smooth over some of the political discomfort that arises. Nam June Paik, a Fluxus artists arising in the 1960s, humanized and demystified Cold War technology by assembling a tottering robot defecating beans and broadcasting a Kennedy speech. Today, it is not the military-industrial complex providing fodder, but the military-*entertainment* complex (preparing soldiers and populations for 21st century battle and commerce), that videogame artists ominously presage, or caricature into exaggeration. In *Domestic Tension* Iraqi-American Wafaa Bilal locked himself in a gallery for a month to be bombarded with paintballs from a webcam-mounted gun operated by internet users. The work

blends the virtual with the material. By doing so, it encourages players to sensually and seriously consider the interplay between contemporary war and the technologies and analogies of videogames that are used to execute and describe war.

The complicit formal avant-garde is still *formal* insofar that it localizes pressure in specific, special places, such as a gallery, or stretch of highway into a gallery for an afternoon. More importantly, it is formal, because it focuses the audience's energy on an individual, or a small number of individuals: a spectacular artist, a few performers, perhaps a robot. The strategy makes sense, because the complicit formal avant-garde is a postmodern outgrowth of Modern or formal art, which was often predicated on artists being lone visionary heroes. This vision is carried through but inverted via anti-heroic self-effacement, or personal sacrifice. For example, Yoko Ono allowed audiences to cut the clothes off of her in *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964. Or, Chris Burden, who routinely placed his safety in audiences' hands, as well as non-audiences, in a pathological way, for example, climbing into a duffel bag and being thrown onto the highway. Although The Yes Men are a political avant-garde, due to the fact that their events always manage to foreground themselves, their flair and cult of personality, it's easy see them as complicit formal artists as well.

Complicit formalism exposes how players of normal videogames are already cyborgs, strapped up and jacked in, to experience. The artists do this by exaggerating these cybernetic connections into comical monstrosities. Players are sexually serviced, lovingly massaged, hobbled with circuitry, and willfully electrocuted, through hysterics of logic torn between the biological squish and the binary. Procedural loops binding player-and-game are brought into high relief in one moment, blurred beyond recognition the next. In *Cockfight Arena* (2001) players

wear gawky feathered costumes to manipulate two fighting roosters onscreen. The players' physical presence and movements draw as much attention to what is happening in front of the screen as to what is projected on to it. The cluster of associations comprising "videogames" spreads out: mashups of theater and videogames, sculpture and videogames, performance and videogames, take stage. Power spreads out among people as well, as players become gamemakers in the hands of complicit formalists, such as Cory Arcangel, who encourages players to tinker and hack hardware, such as *Super Mario Bros.* cartridges. Through open works like the striking and lighthearted, *Super Mario Clouds* (perhaps the most open work examined in the dissertation), which includes source code, descriptions of his process, and juicy photos and so on, players are seduced into becoming makers.

### *Chapter 5: Complicit Political: Utopia as Everyday Process*

The complicit political avant-garde targets technoculture at large but it does not approach it from only the most oblique angles, like the radicals. The premodern magic circle is still invoked, but the world is blended more tenderly. Rather than confronting multitudes head on, the multitude is seduced to celebrate, or grieve itself, of its own accord. The Situationists of the 1960s were the first avant-garde to articulate how everyday life might be redefined using new media. They took the remix tactics of Dada and developed means for a broader public to use them, not just artists. The most successful thing, in terms of immediate popularity, that the Situationists did was in 1968. In March of '68, anarchist and Leftist students seized power at Nanterre University on the outskirts of Paris, demanding government reform. The Situationists threw fuel on the fire with manifestos, flyers, slogans, and an ethos that helped inflame millions into protest in France, using the high unemployment plaguing the country as a prime catalyst. Beyond the protest,

Situationists developed methods in which urban space could be transformed, life within it reconceived as an open game. Contemporary practice, such as alternate reality games like *The Beast* or *Superstruct*, further develop these strategies. Alternate reality games are collective, participatory narratives played by scalable and networked communities across new and old media platforms, usually incorporating physical space like streets and parks of urban environments. Socially transformative desires are fed and fostered by affording innovative ways for the multitude to unwork power, and re-structure social relations in surprising ways.

The complicit political avant-garde redefines what “politics” means to society. It spreads the political domain into the structures of power, revealing “politics” where before we might only see everyday life. According to commonsense and tradition, “politics” denote a specific set of practices within constitutional systems (voting, running for office, working as a legislator), or direct opposition to that system (political protests, civil disobedience, violent revolution). The complicit political avant-garde does not “oppose” the system, nor do they only work within it. They change the structure of the system from within and without—seeing how it is, and creating a new way for it to be. Traditional liberal politics is issue-based, representative, party-dominated, orderly, and hierarchical. For the complicit political avant-garde, politics is open, bottom-up, personal, concrete, and participatory. Due to its complicity with mainstream culture and our media ecology, this avant-garde may or may not inspire overtly “critical” readings, even as it fosters collective empowerment by redistributing the flow of power from the bottom.

Since the tactic of shock has been co-opted by markets, militaries, and governments, this avant-garde exposes and unworks this dominant aesthetic. They reveal shock as depoliticized kitsch, and collectively unwork its power. The alternate



reality game, *World Without Oil*, was ostensibly about what people in the developed world will do when peak oil is reached and demand for oil far outstrips supply. The puppetmasters of *World Without Oil* incrementally raised the fictional price of gas over several weeks. National economies went into recession, then depression, until civil and international wars ensued—all determined by players. Creatively coping with these challenges, players produced in-game narratives in thousands of blogs, videos, images, and other media exploring this issue in thousands of ways. The actual subject of *World Without Oil* was the mediated construction of crises, demagoguery, and fear in popular culture, not about fossil fuel economies, nor about any particular crisis about oil. The process and “ecstasy of communication” was dissected, deflated, and reconstructed, as players weighed one another’s fantasies, fears, solutions, and insights. The blunt ignorance and sheer face of the actual spectacle was rendered alienating and horrid by comparison, in its palpable lack of suppleness and self-awareness. Popular shock looked more and more like propaganda. Media that is critically remixed, or *détourned*, to use the term of the Situationists, is its own demystifying agent. The chapter concludes with a reexamination of utopia. This avant-garde works with the idea that utopia is not a literary destination determined by institutional, prewritten laws, but that utopia is a messy process. Utopia is a collective, open way of being in technoculture. Utopia is *atopian*, potentially everywhere and animated with the mundane, rather than nowhere and animated only by the most heavenly enlightened intellectuals.

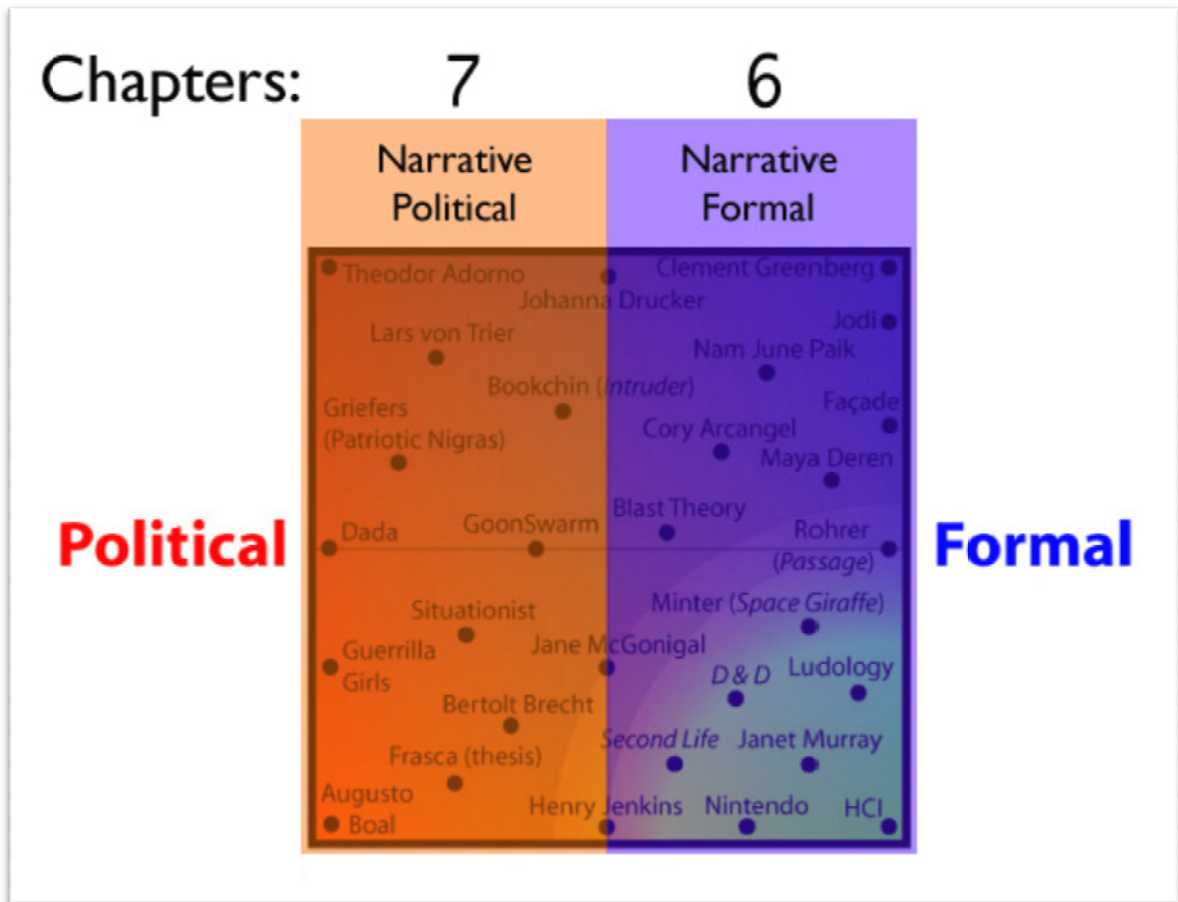


Figure 1-20 Chapters 6 and 7 examine avant-garde game narratives along formal and political lines.

### *Chapter 6: Narrative Formal: Making the Stone “Stony”*

The narrative formal avant-garde makes, for example, a stone *stony* by defamiliarizing or estranging the stone’s mediation. Perceptions and projections of reality are renewed through warping. We look, act, and play, in our everyday lives out of routine habits. When some familiar object, place, or event, is represented in a strange way, efforts must be redoubled to reestablish understanding, re-categorizing the thing or moment. Then we must deal with the altered network of associations. “Narrative formalism,” comes from a historic, pivotal school of literary criticism, called Russian Formalism. Russian Formalism was influential for various Modern

literary and aesthetic philosophies that succeeded it throughout in the 20th century. Russian Formalists were the first avant-garde to formulate theories of medium-specificity in general, and the autonomy of poetic language and literature, in particular. Victor Shklovsky published a landmark essay in 1917 entitled, “Art as Device,” where the phrase “make the stone *stony*” originates. From an epic novel to the syllable, narrative formalists seize upon language at every scale and angle, level of complexity, and temporal duration. For example, read aloud the line from, *Susie Asado* (1912), a poem by Gertrude Stein: “Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.” Simple and illustrative, in its elocution, a few things might strike us. First, we become sensually aware of the materiality of language through the textured thread of alliteration, repetition, and rhyme. Second, we might imagine, or unconsciously recall, sipping that cool and light, bittersweet taste past our lips and palate. The two effects are complementary, as Stein leisurely works our embodied memory of taste-feel-text-sound, we can fleetingly taste orality.

The game genre that is most ostensibly literary, Interactive Fiction, is a regular font of narrative formal work. Interactive Fiction (IF) is usually thought of as the classic text adventure, although many classify graphic puzzle adventures, like *Myst*, within IF. By accident and by design, IF makes stones *stony*. Players type in commands to control their avatar, talk with characters, move through environments, manipulate objects, and progress the narrative. The game states: “There is a rock on the ground.” So you type, “take the rock.” To which the game replies, “I don’t understand ‘rock’.” Rack your brain, and perhaps pound out, “take the stone,” and finally, it reads: “stone taken.” Through idiotic irony, the inability of the parser to process the assumptions of everyday language has the effect of defamiliarization. It makes the stone *stony*, or more accurately, the *directive action* of picking up the stone, or whatever the action might be, through the machine ignorance of “rock.” Avant-

garde works embrace the strategies of narrative formalism more comprehensively than parser frustrations. Adam Cadre's IF game, *Photopia*, is plotted in a way that does not make immediate sense. The player begins as a hung-over passenger in a speeding car packed with college students that crashes into another car and promptly dies. Through non-sequitur scenes, and mystifying shifts in perspective, the game jumps forward and backwards in time, and back and forth between different kinds of characters and agencies. The life and death of a character named, "Alley," is the axis around which the bizarre structure works, but this structure, in turn, exaggerates and distorts its own topic, serially rendering it haunting, humorous, sad, and alien.

*Façade*, a graphical "interactive drama" by Mateas and Stern, is one of the finest works of this videogame avant-garde. You play a longtime friend of a bickering couple on the brink of divorce. A visitor in their apartment, you click around on objects and type to speak to Grace and Trip. They speak in audio clips, leaving you feel a bit mute. An AI "drama manager" orchestrates "dramatic beats," the smallest unit of story change, in order to flesh out the overarching plot. Mateas asks, "how can an interactive experience have the experiential properties of classical, Aristotelian drama (identification, economy, catharsis, closure) while giving the player the interactive freedom to have a real effect on the story?"<sup>48</sup> Of course, none of this works as planned. Grace and Trip are creepy. They half understand what you type, picking up tones but not content. It renders their off responses Lovecraftian, imposter-like of the human. This is accentuated temporally and graphically: while the drama manager is calculating what to do next, the couple blankly breathes and stares at the player like automatons, lobotomized, awaiting orders from an unseen mind controller. The marriage is not the façade, but they are, husks of an alterior presence. An electric pulse, unfamiliar with how humans should act, is suddenly

“down there” crunching its circuitous heart out to suck you into its failing drama. Grace and Trip are suspended in a *dramatic uncanny valley*—in the discrepancy between conventional mediation of dramatic of human characters (established in Hollywood film, TV, and increasingly in games) and the actual, yet unrealistic, zombie-alien, behavior of Grace and Trip.

### ***Chapter 7: Narrative Political: Transforming Entertainment***

The narrative political avant-garde believes that if we can transform how we mediate and control our storytelling entertainments, we can shift or unwork the political logics that move and motivate culture in general. The first step is to reveal and emphasize how our fictions are mediated, how fictions are materially or digitally constituted. In the theater of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, audiences were persistently reminded of the fact that they are sitting in an auditorium before a stage. Stage lights and operators were purposely left exposed, as well as various other elements of the production. By reminding people that they are playing a videogame or sitting in a theater, the narrative political avant-garde tries to conjure an analytical mood in the player. *September 12th*, examined earlier in the introduction, is a prime example. Players can concentrate on the underlying causal structure of the story and its significance to technoculture, what is being modeled and why.

The role of fate in drama, the way the important action seems inevitable, beyond even the control of the characters that enact it, is politically problematic. The hero learns his skill in the nick of time; the train leaves the station just as the jaded lover realizes his error; the villain almost wants to be caught, killed, and punished. To accept dramatic fate is an analogue for assimilating into society's power

structures. Aristotelian drama is essentially conservative, even when it portrays liberal topics because of the sublimation. There is an underlying political purpose to dramatic empathy: to drain the audience of the impulse to affect their own social structures. Fate becomes flow in games. The special challenge videogames face is the need to draw out the crisis, or climax, of the experience to sustain attenuated activity for the entire game. Not only does an entire 40-hour game follow an Aristotelian framework, but each individual level, and even sections of levels, where a constant flow of perfect challenges demand immediate action. Videogames perpetually delay a final dramatic closure, but must make it seem a complete resolution is always about to occur—if the player can execute just one more heroic act. Dramatic closure isn't reached, yet in the circuit of engagement an “electronic closure” is secured at all times. Videogames that reveal how they bring the player within their power, while also modeling the world in some way, are narrative political.

Power can be distributed even more thoroughly when audiences or players take on the role of artists and creators even as they consume the play or the game. Augusto Boal teaches the poor in Latin American barrios to use theater to simulate and present their own local and personal political situations about domestic abuse, corporate exploitation, government corruption, and so on. As a skit plays out, any audience member can replace an actor onstage and show how that scene could have played out differently. Social and personal agency replaces apathy and frustration, as people's everyday lives become theatrical, malleable, and replayable. Gonzalo Frasca applies Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* to videogames in his master's thesis, *Videogames of the Oppressed*. Videogames can both model (virtually simulate) and manifest (materially realize) social forces. This dual affordance arises from the medium's duality of being popular entertainment, and a medium capable of modeling worlds to play with. Frasca's thesis can be drawn out further than he

realized. Historically, certain mediums have become more fungible and available to greater numbers of people: the medium of *drawing* was once the privy of shamans and visionaries; *print*, once the domain of the church and aristocracy; *photography*, once the domain of tinkerers and artists; *video*, the domain of engineers and commercial studios. Videogames are “liquefying” through a variety of forces, becoming more fluid and transferable to more people. Video artists of the 60s and 70s presaged “YouTube Poop” today, just as today’s videogame artists might presage a future of videogames. It is not unimaginable that in the ensuing decades, it will be as easy and obvious, for the average person, to make videogames from scratch, or to fundamentally remix and share them, as it is now with drawing, text, photographs, and video.

### *Conclusion*

Each chapter is a perspective that treats similar forces differently, shaping our experience along divergent rhetoric. For an autistic-like, zoomed-in and zoned out focus, we have radical formalists, twitching and twisting gamespace as lone Cartesian pilots skating at the edges of human-computer experience. For a zoomed-out and zoned-in focus, we have the swarming multitude, wielding the bottom-up transformative force of politics. Cutting across the field in along a more lateral trajectory, are the narrative folks blending popular dramatic conventions with form and politics, all so we might unwrite or rewrite reality. Finally, by presenting a collection of events and works in this research, many of which might indeed be “marginal,” hopefully, we should now be more attuned to a broader range of subtlety, and not only able to appreciate grand, explosive, or supposedly “great” examples.

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<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>.
- 21 Drucker, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2005.
- 22 I'm perpetuating a mischaracterization of Greenberg here for the sake of clarity. Greenberg repeatedly denied that evoking flatness should serve as the universal criterion for painting, and that criterion did not determine how he critiqued premodern painting, for example.

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- 27 Ibid., 8.
- 28 Ibid., 22.
- 29 Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2009: 1.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 "Copyright protection subsists, in accordance with this title, in original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium of expression, now known or later developed, from which they can be perceived, reproduced, or otherwise communicated, either directly or with the aid of a machine or device. [...] In no case does copyright protection for an original work of authorship extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied in such work." From "Copyright Law of the United States of America and Related Laws Contained in *Title 17 of the United States Code*."
- 32 Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*.
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- 34 Galloway couches the entire avant-garde of videogames in political terms, calling all of it, “counter-gaming,” although his evaluative method is grounded in formal analysis.
- 35 Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993: 2.
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- 37 Ibid., 42.
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- 42 Flow, as a media concept, dates at least back to Raymond Williams who analyzed television programming as ideally maintaining a smooth flow of images streaming to the viewer.
- 43 Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991: 71.
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## CHAPTER 2: RADICAL FORMAL: PLAY BEYOND FLOW

### The Flow of Technoculture

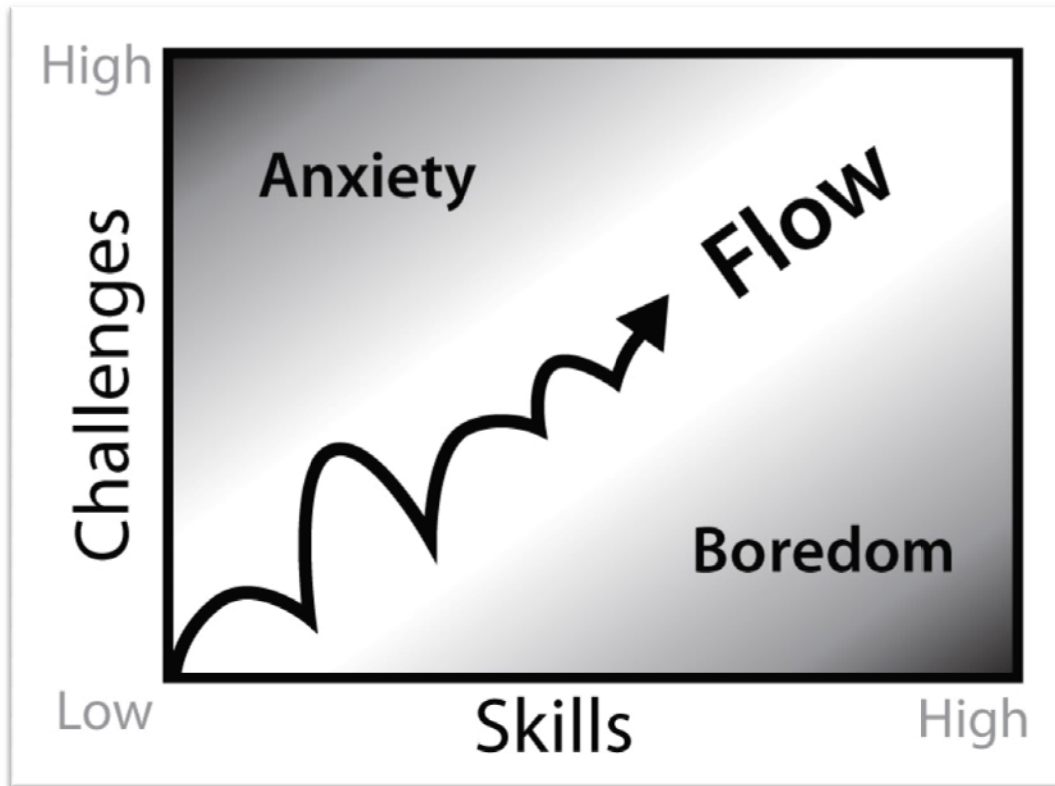


Figure 2-1 Reproduction of Csíkszentmihályi's diagram of *flow* integrated with ideas of Noah Falstein. A videogame with flow constantly pushes the player's abilities just enough to keep her fully engaged.

A popular ideal in the videogame community is to design games and to desire gameplay that put players into the zone or flow.<sup>1</sup> In simple terms, flow is "optimal experience," according to psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Although, not every game developer uses the word "flow," it is a given concept that permeates the industry. Flow is the standard around which all possible variations of gameplay gravitates in the industry's collective mind. Most games don't offer it, or at least don't offer it consistently, but every designer worth her salt wishes her

players to feel it. Electronic Arts speaks of the “X-Factor” of its games, which is gameplay at the edge of the flow channel. The feeling of momentarily losing control, palpably felt, for example, in the sliding, screeching drift in racing games, is a mark of quality. Alternatively, the easy “three frets” setting on *Guitar Hero* aids non-gamers to jump in immediately. In that case, control is stripped down to the simplest of tasks because new players already feel that they lack control, and the goal is to get them in the groove, even if they have to do almost nothing to get there. Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as a dynamic balancing based on a person’s constantly shifting horizon of skill, focus, and interest. An experience with flow oscillates around a player’s capacity to manage the experience:

[It is] a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous.<sup>2</sup>

Csíkszentmihályi’s examples of flow are amazingly broad. Playing chess, rock climbing, sculpting clay, and religious prayer all make appearances in his research. The optimality of an experience depends on many factors, such as cultural conditions, and the individual’s condition: age, mood, the activity’s cultural function, and so on. Despite of the dizzying range of things to consider when designing for flow, the goal is always the same: participants lose self-consciousness in the enveloping action. The flow arrow wobbles up, and falls back down,

representing the fluctuating levels of difficulty that occur over the course of a game. This addition was introduced by Noah Falstein, who has elaborated on the theory of flow to aid game developers. Another prominent game designer and theorist, Jesse Schell, argues that flow has a fractal-like quality: the contour of experience of an entire game is congruent to that of a level; the contour of experience of a level is congruent to many shorter, fleeting moments within a level.<sup>3</sup> The game designer must “tell the story every way possible,” a lesson taken from Walt Disney, now commonly heard in introductory media and game design courses.

Csikszentmihályi expands the flow ideal beyond games, and encapsulates social life itself within its warm embrace. Flowing games become models for successful, happy cultures:

games provide a compelling analogy to cultures. Both consist of more or less arbitrary goals and rules that allow people to become involved in a process and act with a minimum of doubts and distractions. [...] When a culture succeeds in evolving a set of goals and rules so compelling and so well matched to the skills of the population that its members are able to experience flow with unusual frequency and intensity, the analogy between games and cultures is even closer. In such a case we can say that the culture as a whole becomes a “great game.”<sup>4</sup>

When this “great game” meets proceduralism, an interesting synthesis occurs. By proceduralism, I mean the popular, often implicit, belief that the nature of the universe is scientific and procedural. The image of the universe as a big computer has supplanted the industrial-era image of the universe as a great big clock. The next iteration of this image is perhaps cloud computing, multiple networks, or whatever

captures the imagination of an era. Today, technoculture regards all facets of the world as ripe for proceduralization. It resists the notion that procedures may not be able to model anything we wish. It sees everything: quantum reality, metaphysical reality, “spiritual” reality, and so on (in that any of these truly exist), as being wholly reducible to a computational understanding. Reality is essentially a “real” simulation—ultimately something that can be circumscribed, ruled, and simulated by a computer.

If experience of life, and of being, are essentially procedural, then they are perfectly prepped for assimilation into a colossal computer game. Looking at it in reverse, videogames become perfect microcosms of the “great game” of life. This makes the training genre, redundant. All games would train us to playfully function in reality. Videogames as training, and videogames as escape, converge in this new faithful view of the universe seen through the reductive lens of binary computation. We don’t need advocates like Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Hollywood apocalypse movies where the “videogame kid” can fly the alien ship, Raph Koster, and the like, to tell us that videogames are training us to master life in a highly advanced and precarious technoculture, games are doing it themselves.



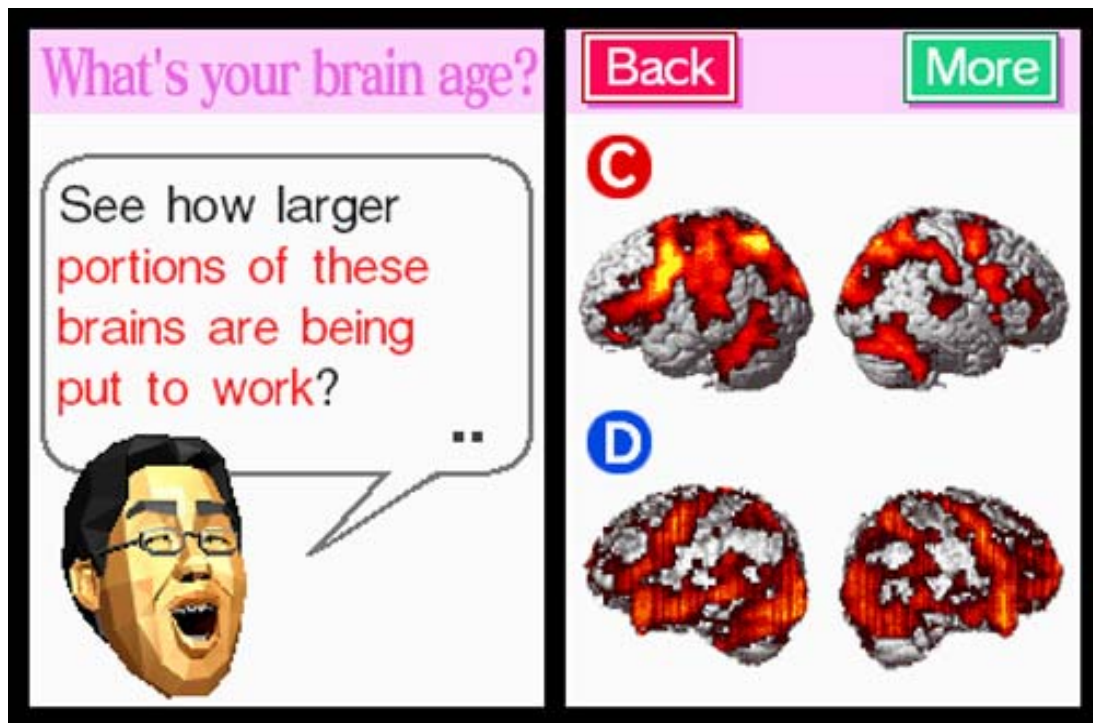


Figure 2-2 *Brain Age* for the Nintendo DS illustrates how it rejuvenates the player's brain.

Game enthusiasts today, from Paul Gee to Raph Koster, argue that games cannot help but serve an educational function. These writers are reacting to familiar criticisms of violence, sexism, unhealthy distraction, isolation, and phallocentrism. The defensive argument about the educational value of games is more than just an attempt to answer or invert these traditional criticisms. It is an argument in favor of proceduralism for its own sake—it is a modernist argument stripped down by a populist acceptance of the ideology of technoculture. The assumption is that if people are exercising complex pattern recognition by playing games, then they are culturally enriching and worthwhile. The more effectively people can manipulate the procedures of a videogame, the better (supposedly) people will become at manipulating the procedures that increasingly comprise everyday life.

Another way to look at it was suggested by Frederic Jameson in the rise of postmodernism. We only need to extend his observation to address our present procedural condition. In the 1980s, Jameson claimed that it is “empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.”<sup>5</sup> In the 21st century technoculture demands that we define ourselves not according to a spatial mode of engagement but a one of computational productivity. Videogames assimilate us into technoculture. Our play is materially no different than our work. It is all knowledge work, but with different degrees of elasticity and cultural framing. Insofar that videogames flow for players, they are that efficient a feedback loop for technoculture. Flowing videogames advance the technologization of society and the world. Videogames recoup our surplus energy and channel it into a demand for more videogames, faster digital networks, handier mobile technology, and waves of entertainment that show off our technological progress.

Formal avant-garde videogames explore the nature of videogames outside the technocultural flow. It shows us how to play Csíkszentmihályi’s great game in a different way. Instead of obsessing about the future horizon of games, they allow us to stop for a moment and ask where we already are. They manifest gameplay experiences irreducible to proceduralism. Historically, the formal avant-garde manifested painting experiences irreducible to receding space and representational logic. It took generations for people to see them this way, and many still refuse to stop and look at a painting, and rather demand every painting be a virtual window into a pleasure space. Before we explore gameplay beyond flow, it is helpful to examine how painting broke off and explored the very space that Jameson mentioned. How and why was painting explored beyond the virtual window,

beyond its use-value for the church or aristocracy, to propagate faith, or display social status? In the 19th century, artists rejected the cultural function of painting as a service through which to see flowing spaces, and reframed it as an unstable and little-explored artistic *medium*. Once we have a historical process with which to compare, we can examine how the avant-garde reconfigures videogames, and how it reveals how academic approaches (ludology, narratology, videogames as rhetoric), and proceduralist faith has penetrated the medium and homogenized its cultural function.

### **What is a “Medium”?**

The term *medium* in this research is meant to connect videogames to art history rather than media theory or communication theory, which address different cultural and technological issues with the same term. The “medium” of media studies is an abbreviated and incomplete version of the “medium” of art practice and art history. The understanding of what “medium” means in media studies is culturally dominant. Supposedly, a “medium” is solely based on the material supports, not the cultural conventions, or the sensations afforded. The medium of film is celluloid. The medium of painting is the paint. The medium of videogames is the computational procedure. This reductive and technocentric view is destructive to art practice and ignorant of art history. In art history, each “medium” is a synthesis of cultural and sensual elements as well as material elements. Moreover, it is the task of artists and their critical audiences to subject the medium to constant redefinitions by playfully recombining these three formal elements.

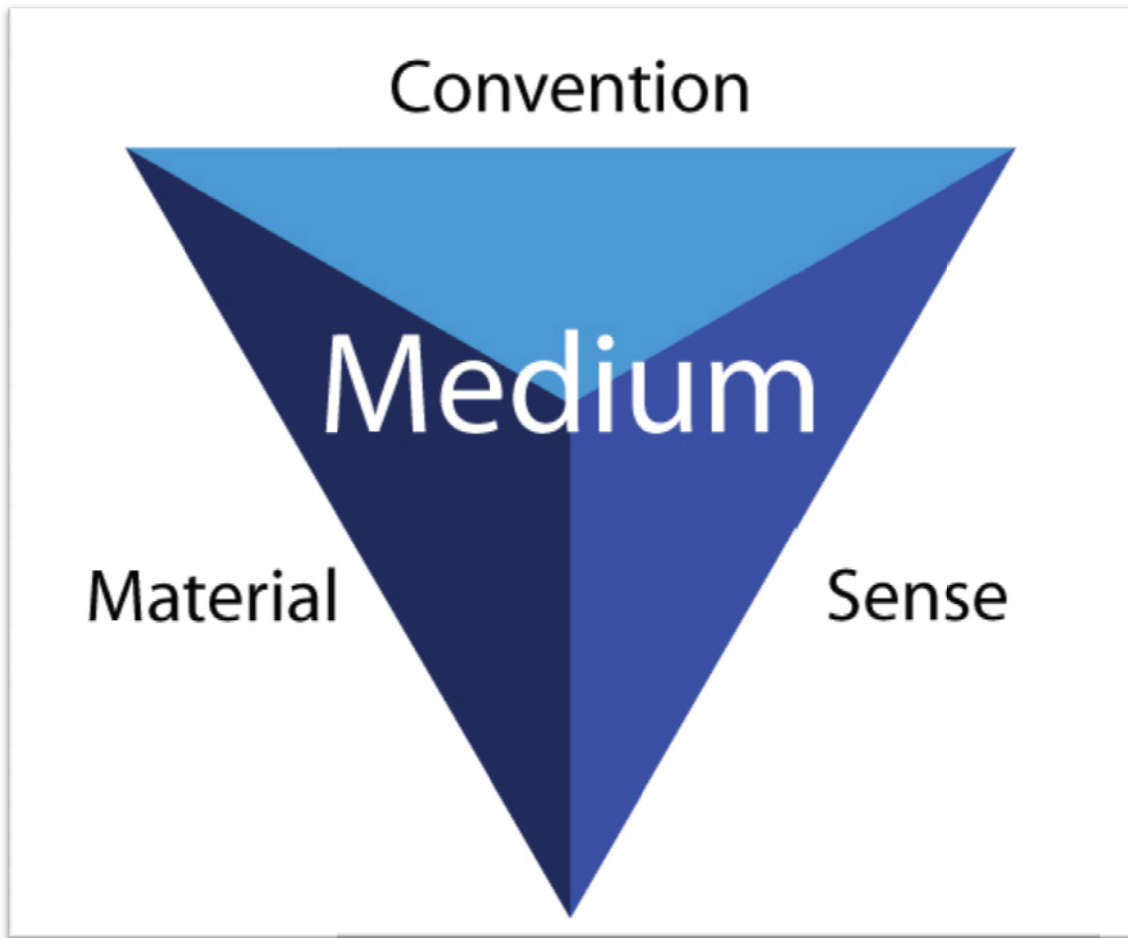


Figure 2-3 A graphic representation of the triad of formal components: *materials*, *conventions*, and *sensations*, together comprise an artistic medium.

This graphic representation combines several historical approaches to the nature of an artistic medium. An artistic medium is comprised of three elements: materials, sensations, and conventions. The three parts together comprise the *form* of an artistic medium. Radical formal practice asks what the videogame form actually is, interrogating the medium along these three vectors. The material aspect is the technology upon which the medium is built. This includes canvas, brushes, pigment, wooden supports, varnish, perhaps even the physical space of the art studio or gallery space, and so on. The sensual aspect is the sum of the ways that we can detect and manipulate that material technology. A medium is sensually constrained

by our capacities to touch, see, hear, etc., and by our physiology: the fact we have two hands, two thumbs, are so many feet tall on average, etc. If an artist painted with invisible pigment, we would not know there was a painting in front of us. Most of the materiality of a medium actually lies outside our immediate sensual domain. X-rays of paintings or videogame consoles reveal layers of technology usually hidden from sight and consideration. The conventional aspect includes the social and cultural encoding that give meaning to our sensual engagement with these material technologies. This is all the genres, grammars, and cultural logics that the medium uses to convey meaning. Determining where one support ends and another begins is contentious. Is the ubiquitous computational ballistic logic of videogames (in their cameras, bullets, and movements) a *cultural convention* of videogames or is it a *material constraint* embedded in technology—is it vestigial evidence of the medium's military-industrial origins? Regardless, material, convention, and sense, are the three supports of the hybrid monster: artistic "medium."

Frederic Jameson synthesizes artistic "medium" with three similar categories of aesthetic sense, material technology, and cultural conventions: "the word *medium* [...] now conjoins three relatively distinct signals: that of an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production, that of a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine; and that, finally, of a social institution."<sup>6</sup> The fact that Jameson reduces everything to "signals," to semiotics, or texts, reveals the actual purity of the postmodern view, which believes nothing escapes culture. This postmodern view sees Duchamp's urinal as solely acting upon the *conventions* of art, and is unable to see or appreciate the urinal's "thingly" presence, and uncanny nature, its *sensuality*. A common claim in art schools today, for undergraduates and graduates alike, is: "My work is a critique of X." The X is corporatism, militarism, sexism, and so on. The hegemonic insistence on textual readings, rhetorical

arguments, or political justifications of art, impedes art's divergence and diversity, and, ironically, limits the potential political or critical force that an art might actually be able to summon. Contemporary critics like Johanna Drucker, historical critics like Greenberg, and late 20th century critics like Susan Sontag, have all made this argument.<sup>7</sup> Rather than only trying to signify meanings, formal art is also interested in exactly *how* a signified becomes a signifier, all the behind-the-scenes work of signification.

Rosalind Krauss in her book, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, expresses her wish to bury and be done with the notion of “medium” altogether as she talks about contemporary art in a similar vein to Jameson, foregrounding cultural conventionality as the wellspring (and ultimately the grave) of art. Even as she wishes to bury formalism, Krauss remains formal and advances the formal method. Krauss does not actually diverge from Modern formulations of “medium,” because she still sees cultural conventions as the key to understanding art—which is an idea that comfortably lives in the formal method. However, most theorists mix their favorite supports of medium. Immanuel Kant, Mark Hansen, and Ortega y Gasset (in his analysis of art and phenomenology) tend to emphasize *sense* and *materiality*. The Russian Formalists, narratologists, and ludologists, all tend to focus on *material* and *convention*. Wassily Kandinsky, John Dewey, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek tend to highlight *sense* and cultural *conventions*. Each of these approaches is viable, but should be nonexclusive. Each approach is provisional, comprising a part of a greater whole of form—form that is far bigger than one artist, one work, or one theorist. This kaleidoscopic approach to form, in microcosm, mimics the slovenly approach we might use to frame the expansive avant-garde field itself, as formal, political, radical, complicit, narrative, used to structure this research.

## The Emergence of Modern Painting

It is modern and romantic to imagine an artistic medium as a feral beast to be conquered and mastered into submission. The hero-myth of the Modern artist is wielder of the masterful stroke or musical note. This myth has swept up the game community who celebrates the design of a hyper-generative gameplay algorithm, or the great auteur such as Sid Meier who had a singular and expansive vision for *Civilization*. Historical ambiguities toward artistic mediums can work against these popular myths. For example, Greenberg recast the modern artist as submissive to the medium, not the other way around:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space.<sup>8</sup>

From this view, painting is painfully "discovered" or "rediscovered" after generations of failure or stagnation. To paint, or to look at a painting, is to be open to the particular experience of that painting. We do not need to "use" a painting to achieve a specific type of experience, whether it is spiritual, financial, perceptual, social, and so on. This is because the experience of painting is itself in question, in play. If we must collapse the experience of making or looking at painting into the semiotic realm, then we may ask, "How is painting a medium?" Art critic, Maurice Dennis, advised the salon public in 1890, "It is well to remember that a picture – before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."<sup>9</sup> Maurice Dennis's advisory is elitist because it instructs the audience to appreciate art beyond the ritual

expectations. Prodding the audience to question the experience of “painting” seemed as if it was too much to ask. What has happened in more than a century since? It has now become conventional for many viewers to say that “anything is art,” or to believe that paintings do not need to be representational. Now consider how many players question the experience of “videogames” today. Are videogames treated with that same degree of plasticity and openness, or even openness fueled by apathy? How many believe that videogames don’t need to service players with flow? The medium of painting is less institutionalized than the medium of videogames. Entertainment is more regulated than art, therefore requiring an avant-garde to challenge it from its enclave of safe conventions. Videogame players do not presently like to explore territory where power is transferred from producers and consumers to artistic players and gamemakers. Players want regulation and rules—an administered art that imbues maximum meaning and power to player effort.





Figure 2-4 *Flagellation* (1455–1460) by Piero della Francesca has gridlines ruling its construction of space similar to those in the holodeck.

To understand the possibilities revealed by Modern painting we must remember the rules of Renaissance painting that it playfully reworked. In the Renaissance, painting became a virtual window looking into “naturally” presented worlds. Techniques for producing perspective were developed in the early Renaissance by Leon Battista Alberti in his 1435 treatise, *De Pictura*. He referred to the picture frame as a window and offered methodology for artists to achieve powerful illusions of depth. Alberti is the author of the all-important vanishing point, where parallel lines converge in the distance. Notice in *Flagellation* (1455–1460), how space is neatly gridded. Renaissance artists perfected such techniques to achieve a gravitational sense of receding space. Figures were proportionally measured and fleshed out with chiaroscuro, highlights and shading, and the magical effect of foreshortening. The loaded term, “realism,” is sometimes used to describe

this technique. The realism of the Renaissance is doubly relevant: the game industry has been following a similar program for decades. The more powerful the illusory trick, the better. Computer graphic techniques remediate the spatial schema of Renaissance painting but along the trajectory of machine logic rather than humanist logic. The invisible grid that guided the drawing of perspective is now emblematic components of computer graphics. They have become the lines that define our technologies of representation in modeling, animation, and rendering applications like Maya and game engines like Unreal and Unity.

Renaissance painting fixed the viewer in an optimal place and distance before the canvas. According to Alberti, the illusory plane on which the painted figures stand is to seem like an extension of the floor on which the viewer is standing. Just as the painter positioned everything in an ideal place within the painting, the painting secures its viewers directly in front of it. Standing to the side will warp the effect. In contrast, you could look askew at a painting in the Middle Ages and not have any conception of a “right” or “wrong” viewing position. In Renaissance painting the even and ordered distribution of space represented the Creator’s control over the world. A master craftsman regulated the world so that Renaissance man could function perfectly within it. The price of having a central role and orientation was submission to the structure of that space and the established order of things. The humanist view and lingering medieval Christian view were still fused in the Renaissance. Even though man has a low position in this scopic regime, he wields a measure of power as the axis and center of attention. The universe is the husk to his kernel. It is still as if *“Man was the eye for which reality had been made visible.”*<sup>10</sup> With the emergence of Modern painting in the 19th century, the medium bent, divided, and abandoned the rules of perspectival space, and man—at least “man” as we knew him—was no longer the eye for which reality was made visible.

Renaissance perspective is an analogue to optimal gameplay flow. Just as perspective guides and controls the viewer in traditional painting, common game formulas guide and control the player in a videogame by rewarding and regulating behavior along certain paths and goals. Perspective has been mobilized not only in time, but also in function.

It isn't just about spatial illusion, but temporal illusion. We want time to fly. We want to feel like masters of the machine, dispatching waves of enemies. Man is no longer the measure of all things, but the computer and what we can do with it. The grid in *De Pictura* constructs space as something in which man is central and king, who is only subservient to the God who constructed the spatial grid. The computer grid doesn't centralize man. It centralizes control and management of all that enters the grid, which is everything in the measurable universe. The only God is the internal power to regulate and order this domain.



Figure 2-5 *Olympia* (1863) by Édouard Manet mixes historical and contemporary references by depicting a prostitute in a classical pose.

Édouard Manet was the first to consistently and systematically break apart and reconstruct space and representation in painting, and because of this, Manet is considered by many art historians as the first Modern artist. *Olympia* (1863) depicts a recognizable subject, a young, strong-minded prostitute (gazing at you unimpressed), but it also emphasizes the painting itself in its unblended pigments and large areas left barren with underwash. Jean Ravenel, an art critic at the time lambasted, "What on earth is this yellow-bellied odalisque, this wretched model picked up God knows where and pawned off as representing Olympia?"<sup>11</sup> It was common to critique Manet as an unskilled amateur because of his choice of subject and what appeared to be lack in masterful technique. However, what appeared as a lack was, from another perspective, a kind of creative excess. Manet was exploring new techniques of making paintings, and alternate ways of looking at paintings. The

novel in art is often misunderstood as nonsensical, idiotic, or purely mechanical. Manet is known to have played with photographic technology which may have influenced his work in terms of accidental compositions, washed out figures as if lit by a flash bulb, models gazing at the viewer as an ordinary subject rather than an object of beauty.

Manet was distressed that his contemporaries could not understand why he painted as he did. It took a generation for his work to be hung in the Louvre, through the maneuvering of his compatriot, Claude Monet, and quickly garner popular recognition. Returning to Ravenel's critique, he comes close to answering his own question. Manet gave no reason to paint such a subject. Surrealist writer and theorist, George Bataille later explained that, "the picture *obliterates* the text, *and the meaning of the picture is not in the text behind it but in the obliteration of that text.*"<sup>12</sup> Bataille captures the epistemic shift of Modern art. Art did not need to persuade people or tell stories, whether they were biblical, beautiful, or otherwise. Greenberg later remarked that the canvas and pigment of painting no longer had to be a "stooge" of literature—an argument that reminds us of ludology on its surface although it has a broader purpose.<sup>13</sup> It was not only literature but text and structuralism that were empires to be resisted. It is ironic that these empires are now themselves being digitally colonized and assimilated into network theory and procedural philosophies that logically mimic the internet and contemporary communication technology.

We may say that videogames no longer need to be a stooge of proceduralism, or the flow of technocultural logic. Painting as a medium bleeds over the edges of the human, and that is where we find works aesthetically striking, beautiful, or painful and sublime, or uncanny, and so on. We need not fetishize the divide of

human/world along Kantian lines and only speak of the sublime. Perhaps we can hybridize the modern view with the postmodern and playfully imagine a “punk-Kantian” view, in which the edges of the human experience are fair game to explore but not to tragically obsess over. Schonberg’s twelve tone music was not only described as sublime, but also as breaking a language-barrier: “As long as there was a shred of tonal feeling left among music lovers, and a shred of tonal resource left by composers, the frame of musical reference is still tonal. But once an atonal frame of reference were generally accepted, then music would have stepped across a linguistic border.”<sup>14</sup> In this shifting territory, new rules and grammars had to be constructed and negotiated ad hoc and in real-time by the listeners, viewers, and players.

In Modern painting, the colors, shapes, strokes, and textures of painting could play along the edges of sense and cultural logic. Works could try to lurch ahead of meaning, of our desire to reduce the world to something that must always meaning *for us*. Formal work cuts into our ability to describe and assimilate it into understanding. George Bataille describes how the contemporaries of *Olympia* reacted to its extra-linguistic nature:

Her real nudity (not merely that of her body) is the silence that emanates from her, like that from a sunken ship. All we have is the “sacred horror” of her presence—presence whose sheer simplicity is tantamount to absence. Her harsh realism—which, for the Salon public, was no more than a gorilla-like ugliness—is inseparable from the concern Manet had to reduce *what he saw* to the mute and utter simplicity of *what was there*.<sup>15</sup>

If only the game community could question their own definition of “realism” and ask how videogames could manifest “what was there” no matter how inhuman it seemed. Equivalent to the horror of the brute material presence of paint and uppity prostitutes, is the technocultural disdain of technocultural material out of order: machines that run slow, are outdated, or broken. When technology stops servicing us properly, its presence becomes heavy, oppressive, and uncanny; but the experience it provides is open and contingent. Formally experimental videogames that don’t speak our language or milk that sweet flow are corpses in the living room. They may appear gruesome and unwieldy to us now, but we may see ahead by looking backwards. Olympia’s confrontational, yet enigmatic stare became the thingly stare of the canvas itself. Painting could become post-aesthetic to bear down its presence upon its viewers not as visual objects to admire, but as things to deal with. Modern painting resists the viewer’s attempt to gaze in a penetrative fashion or to “hole through” the canvas. Formalist videogames do something similar. They reflect the player in real-time, feeding back the player’s desire to penetrate and flow through them. The visual wrestling match with Olympia finally gets physical.

## **Flow and Solution Space**

Renaissance perspective has its counterpart not only in the spatial logic of videogames, but also in its temporal logic of flowing control. If the Renaissance painting commands the viewer to: “stand before me frozen in time,” videogames command her to “twaddle before me flowing through time.” By courting players into a flowing experience, the videogame enables them to explore and master its spatial logic. It is cliché for players to describe sandbox games like *Grand Theft Auto* as delivering freedom. Yet, as developers know very well, even the most “open” videogame is intricately designed using indirect control. Those player behaviors

which most leverage and reveal the effort that went into the game's production, will be cued, lured, and called for. Optimal game experiences lead players to believe they are free to act however they wish, when, in fact, they reward and inspire the few afforded behaviors that will lead to more complex engagement with the system. The design of such games continuously constructs player desire and provides the means of satisfying that desire. How much control can the player really handle? How much freedom does she really want? These are the acceptable design questions.

Why can't game design burden players with too much control? Why hide the clicking cycles beneath a veneer of flow, why not let players grab and throttle their sweet addiction until it hurts? Flow must always "hurt" a little. Players must work the cycles of difficulty and reward continuously to achieve a complete psychological workout. The player's desire to get in the flow is a motivating force that designers tweak and tease to no end. The empty promise of an all-encompassing future flow will even keep players interested in games that never even yield a flow experience. But leading game designers know that they have to deliver the goods—that's their job. Jesse Schell advises: "Once you notice a player going into flow during your game, you need to watch them closely—they won't stay there forever. You must watch for that crucial moment—the event that moves them out of the flow channel, so you can figure how to make sure that event doesn't happen in your next prototype of the game."<sup>16</sup>



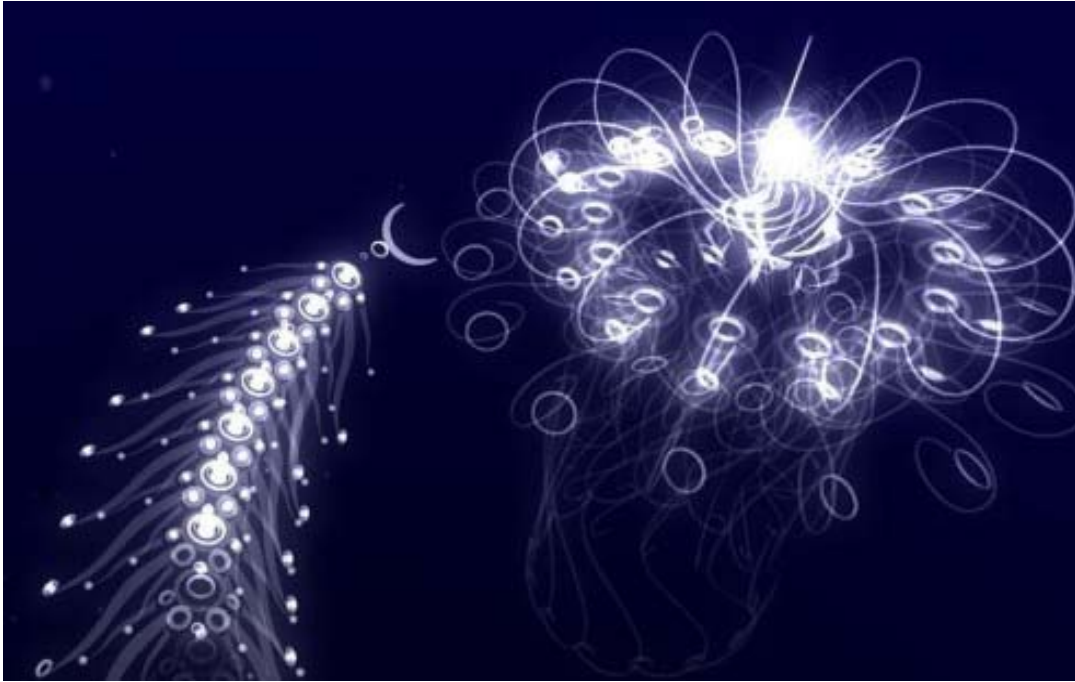


Figure 2-6 *flOw* (2008) for the PlayStation 3, designed by Jenova Chen and Nicholas Clark of thatgamecompany, advance the popular flow ideal in its title and design.

Jenova Chen and Nicholas Clark designed *flOw*, a Flash game, in 2006 in an effort to design a play experience whose flow is gentler, simpler, and more flexible than most commercial games. The player controls a radiant underwater creature that eats debris and other organisms to evolve and grow. As a master's student in the Interactive Media Division at the University of Southern California, Chen wanted "to expand that emotional spectrum of video games." He observed that "nobody is making this kind of game."<sup>17</sup> This statement is curious in that it still values the new and experimental but without questioning flow, the master narrative of game design. To help manage a player's flow, Chen's game uses a unique type of *dynamic difficulty adjustment*—a mechanism that assesses whether the player is progressing too quickly or too slowly. Based on that data, the mechanism determines whether to increase or reduce enemy forces in order to regulate the player's progress. If difficulty adjustments are made in real-time in mainstream games, it is done without

the player's request or knowledge. Chen describes the dynamic difficulty adjustment in *flOw* as active instead of passive. Players determine their preferred level of difficulty in real-time. If you want more challenge, dive to a deeper level, if you want less, ascend. Chen and Clark began their development process by considering what emotion they wanted the player to feel. They crafted the entire game around that goal and succeeded. I have been criticized for not supporting *flOw* when I mention the game. It is a wonderful success story of student ingenuity. It is a fascinating formal experiment. *flOw* deserves academic praise for its application of theory.

However, we can't ignore the fact that *flOw* marginally expands the status quo, stretching it to allow for slightly more atmospheric eat-em-up style games. Eponymously, it only further engrains the dominant flow ritual of the game industry.

Flow is a design paradigm whose sole purpose is to create and sustain desire. Will Wright believes the greatest "differentiating factor" between videogames and other mediums is the ability of the former to learn our desires.<sup>18</sup> To create, nurture, and contain desire is a refreshingly honest definition of videogames as they normally operate.<sup>19</sup> As the player gains power within a system of representation, she aligns herself to be both its *dominating* subject and its *dominated* subject. *Dominating* because the show is all for you and your desire. *Dominated* because it is only a very particular construction of your desire. The desire is to become the deity caught in the representation, but not the one behind it, not the creator designing and coding the world from scratch, not the one making and breaking the infrastructures that sustain the world itself. We don't want to play *with* solution spaces we want to play *in* them. Wright understands this when he describes the difference between linear

games (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Final Fantasy*) and sandbox games (*The Sims*, *Spore*) as quantitative rather than qualitative. He is saying that, in effect, all videogames that value flow, and seek to manifest it in the player, are poured from the same mold. The difference is only quantitative. Sandbox games are only a geometric expansion of the *solution space*:

I try to keep focused on [...] enabling the creativity of the player. Giving them a pretty large solution space to solve the problem within the game. So the game represents this problem landscape. Most games have small solution landscapes, so there's one possible solution and one way to solve it. Other games, the games that tend to be more creative, have a much larger solution space, so you can potentially solve this problem in a way that nobody else has.<sup>20</sup>

Solution space is a way of quantifying the possibilities of play. By implication, and this is the popular assumption, the expansion of the solution spaces in videogames is the metric by which we measure our progress in advancing the medium. This assumption is what animated Chen to add one more emotion to the same mix. However, to frame videogames as a solution space is to define players as solvers of problems, it is to lock the human within a computational and engineering perspective. Technoculture is compounding itself. People become reflections of the computer, algorithms wishing to max out their functionality in the hardware.

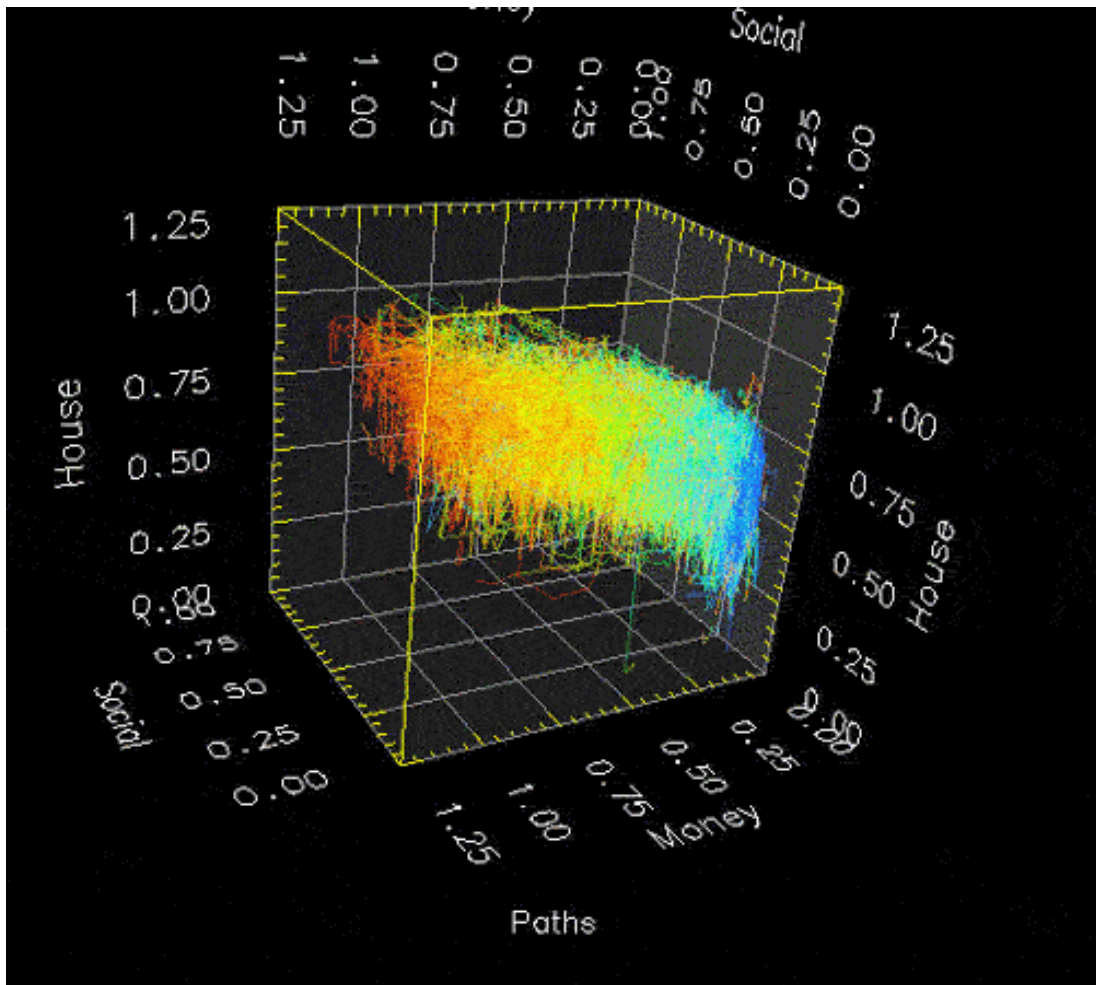


Figure 2-7 Will Wright's visualization of the "solution space" of *The Sims*.

It isn't unique for studios to collect and visualize player performance data in order to tweak and balance design. Bungie studio, developers of the *Halo* franchise, post global heatmaps online indicating where players die, camp, and kill. Players study the maps to game the system more effectively. Wright takes this practice further, mapping flocking patterns of player behavior in the relatively large solution space of *The Sims*. Rather than literally mapping out gamespace, like Bungie, Wright sees gamespace as a psychological-procedural matrix. While looking at a field of cloud data representing player choices in the game, Wright suggests:

you're getting a sense of what the more mainstream play pattern is. But basically you can see that there's kind of this trajectory that's fairly close, there's not a lot of variance in it. You can see the area that represents the house. So typically people build up their house, [...] and then at some point they just kind of level out. And there's definitely some point they reach where they don't really care about the house anymore.<sup>21</sup>

The matrix used to visualize and shape the solution space in videogames is graphically analogous to the gridlines of the holodeck. Both of these contain and support certain associations, behaviors, and procedures. Renaissance artists imitated the lines of the Euclidean universe, which they perceived the creator had designed for them. The figures depicted in these paintings were constrained by a universal design paradigm that the artists assumed was real.

Game designers today don't only imitate these lines visually, but the power structures that they represent. Flow grants our wish to be subjugated into a system—but subjugated perfectly so we aren't burdened with feeling its constraints *as constraints*.<sup>22</sup> We want the illusion of free will. We submit to the procedural loop so we can be constituted as perfect subjects, agents that play their part perfectly. The pleasure of flowing as the ideal subject in a videogame offsets the loss of formal agency as self-consciousness evaporates. The player role is balanced and tested to simulate scenes of agency and criticality, scenes unbalanced but limited to what the system can account for.

What about games which are qualitatively different and not only quantitatively different? Where are, and what are, the other kinds of design molds from which we can pour and draw alterior kinds of experiences of from games? The

formal avant-garde reveals the popular molds as molds, allowing us to touch the walls of the simulation, and push through into the flux beyond the solution space. We can reflexively play with the materiality, sensuality, and conventionality of videogames themselves. Playing formal avant-garde games we might feel less coherent, less perfect as subjects, but we gain new purchases on the medium, on ourselves, and on technoculture. Gameplay becomes irreducible to the flow. We can again face the gaping question of what it means to be a player of a videogame.

### The Grain of Flow



Figure 2-8 *Space Giraffe* by Jeff Minter offers sublime, somewhat painful, gameplay.

Jeff Minter, founder of Llamasoft, is a cult figure in the game industry. Working on the *Tempest* franchise, Minter created surrealist pieces like *Attack of the*

*Mutant Camels* (1983) for the Commodore 64 and Atari 2600. Llamasoft released *Space Giraffe* in 2007, making it available for download on the Xbox Live Arcade for around five dollars. It's a shoot-em-up in which players manipulate a "space giraffe," along a geometric surface similar to *Tempest*. Fire flowers and sparkling grunts swarm the player in a pulsating purple space. Conventions players rely in other games of the genre: flying, shooting, powering-up, are still there but warped, and keep shifting under their feet. This is by design. For example, when the aptly named "feedback monster" is killed gamespace itself wrenches as if pained. "Rotors" are more surgical, disorienting the player as the surface underneath the giraffe is rotated. Dozens of attack-defend combinations emerge from steering bullets to psychedelic power-ups and off-the-grid jumps.

It is daunting or simply impossible for players to adequately handle and comprehend these affordances, to which reviewers complained of "trouble getting to grips with the basics of playing the game." The first official review of the game by *Xbox Magazine* gave it a 2 out of 10: "You'll frequently die because you couldn't pick out the pulsating assassin from the warped playfield floating over the throbbing LSD nightmare that is the background, which makes this game uniquely aggravating."<sup>23</sup> Minter's design answer is unusual. As he describes it: "You'll always make progress in *Space Giraffe*, even as you die repeatedly." It is too hard and too easy at the same time. Even if players cannot performatively keep up with their giraffe, they make passive progress automatically and the levels keep accruing. The game flows with or without you. Figuring out exactly why you are dying or winning is the core experience of the game. It is like playing a game in reverse, where you begin in climax and only later get the basics.

*Space Giraffe* can be understood through Max Ernst's Surrealist technique of *frottage*. Frottage is the use of nauseatingly intricate visual textures (through charcoal rubbings of rock faces, through letting paint stain and scab over canvases, etc.) in order to cause "unconscious irritations" in the viewer. Frottage runs against the grain of Csíkszentmihályi's notion of flow. Flow sutures consciousness within seamless action. Frottage mashes consciousness against rough and undulating form, emphasizing the seam between actor and action itself. It is the visual compression between a dewy cornea and a scratched, greasy surface only inches away. Flow blends us with an idealized self perfectly fit for the action. Frottage foregrounds the porous border of the body and the mind against a disgusting, rippling, damp, and stony, world—or gamespace.

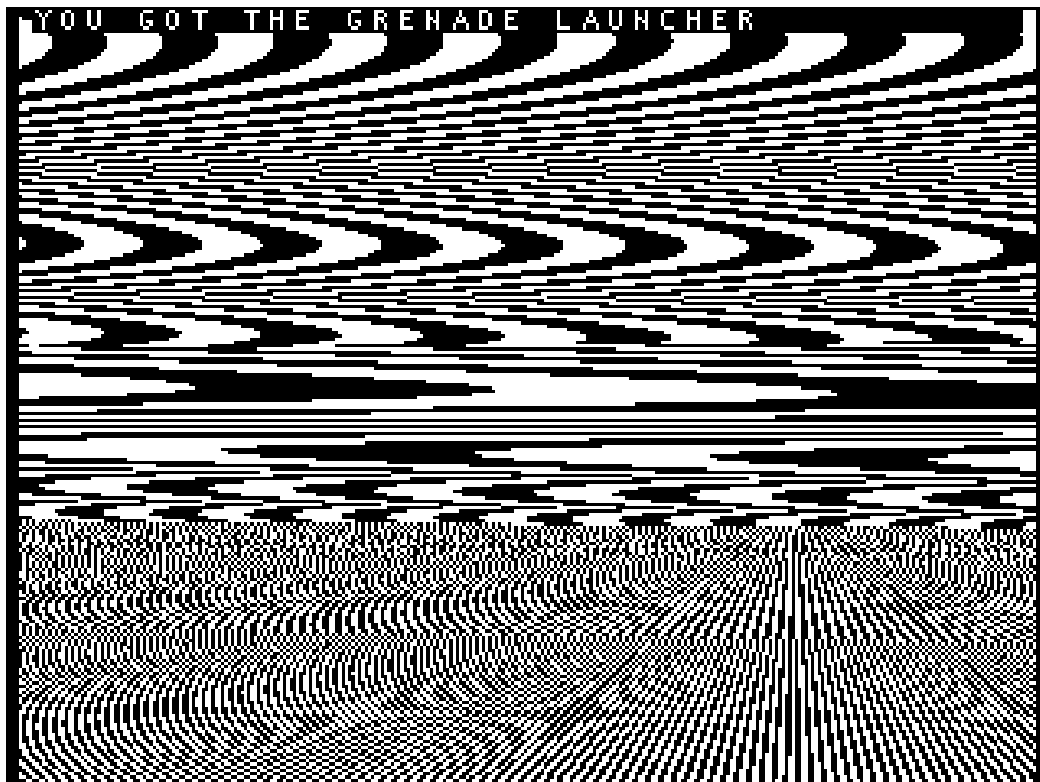


Figure 2-9 *Ctrl-F6*, a section of *Untitled Game* by Jodi, presents gamespace in a way that radically breaks convention, wavering along on the edge of the discernable.



A formal work that is more extreme and conventionally disorienting than *Quilted Thought Organ* or *Space Giraffe* is *Untitled Game* (1996-2001) by the artist group Jodi (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans). *Untitled Game* was featured in *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art*, a landmark exhibition curated online in 1999 by Anne-Marie Schleiner. *Untitled Game* is a collection of game modifications using the *Quake* game engine (the first fully 3D engine). The original *Quake* game was a first-person shooter in a dungeon maze teeming with the offspring of demons. The artists say they:

erase the story and the figurative site of these games. The starting idea was to find very basic forms like just a line or a square, just black and white, and attach these forms to the behaviour of the code so that we would have a better view on how such a game is driven, what are the dynamics of the game. [...] On the one side, what we wanted to do was to undress *Quake* from all the skins, the graphics and on the other side we dress up the code a little bit. The code gets “something” so you—as the user—get some kind of idea of what the code is doing.<sup>24</sup>

Graphical and narrative skins are peeled off the original game. It is not only what is contained in gamespace that is deconstructed, it is gamespace itself that gets the treatment. Jodi refers to videogame engines as “perspective engines.” This works on two levels. The obvious level is the way game engines tend to promote a particular way of seeing and thinking about space through Euclidean mathematics. The second level is behavioral, in the sense that this perspectival space helps to focus the player’s aggressive action. Jodi works the medium on both levels. In several sections of *Untitled Game* (entitled *ctrl-space*, *ctrl-9*, *Ctrl-F6*) gamespace is not rendered in what we generally think of as 3D or even 2D. In the *Ctrl-F6* section, gamespace

chaotically erupts all over the screen as the player “walks” through it by pushing the conventional FPS forward button, the W key. The horizon-line is detectable in the above screenshot, with the ground taking up the lower third of the image. As the player looks around the noise by scrolling the mouse, the hyper-dimensional checkerboard seems to eat itself. The slightest nudge sends the chunky static reeling so that “output far exceeds input.”<sup>25</sup>

This game rearticulates and presents to the player the conventions of gamespace that are usually intuited and invisible. The player develops an acute awareness of the ways in which her hand and finger motions are mapped to space. Her input is not channeled through the usual game verbs: collect, destroy, build, match, select. Looking and walking are not executed in the ways that are conventional for in videogames, but it is critically important that they are not entirely different, either. The gamespace and the player’s virtual body are still present, but are out of sync with one another, as are all the correlating functions of gameplay. It is as if the player is a ghost drifting through the machine’s body. Click-slaughtering enemies is possible, but only if the player can orient herself to this new format, parse the audiovisual cues, and consciously recall the conventions she’s inculcated in previous FPS gameplay.

The overflow of materiality between player and medium in *Ctrl-F6* could be compared to the surrealist technique of frottage. It is as if the player were rubbing against the grain of the game engine, materially, sensually, and conventionally. In normal use, *Quake*’s rendering and physics engine draw in the player into projecting herself into the virtual space of the game. Jodi’s modification replaces that visual projection with a haptic sensation of the game’s technology and the normal conventions of gameplay. Virtuality is felt as a corporeal pressure. Wheeled

computer mouse, plastic keyboard, and illuminated screen push back against the player at one instant, and give way, the next. Unfamiliar physical sensations and novel gameplay associations are allowed to form. For the videogame to become playable, the player must reconstruct gamespace itself as a solution space—they must become a Will Wright, in a sense, and do some design work of their own. Playing becomes a second-order challenge, or meta-challenge, because figuring out *how* to play is harder than actually playing.

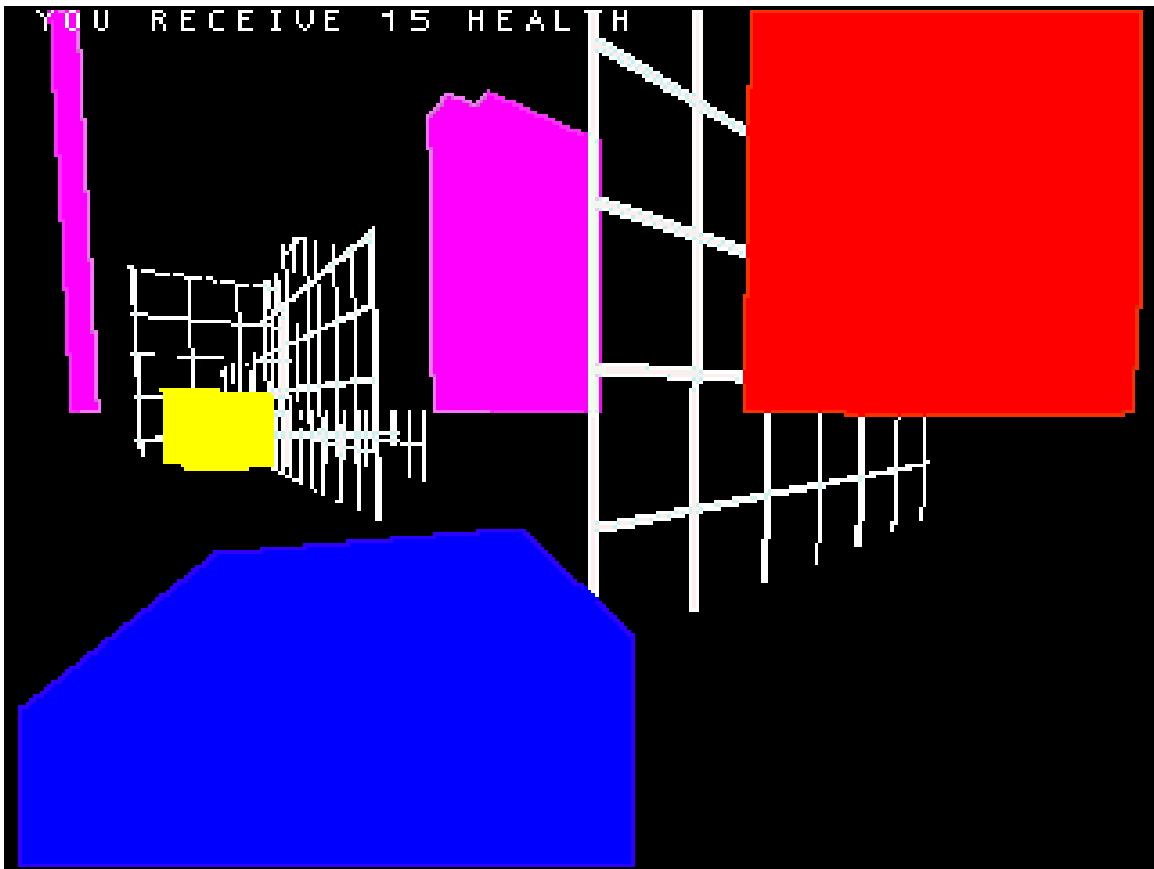


Figure 2-10 In Jodi's *Slipgate* visual space is out of sync with the collision space, allowing the player to play in the gulf between the two.

The section of *Untitled Game* entitled *Slipgate* is less tactile and esoteric than *Ctrl-F6*. In *Slipgate*, a void-black 3D gamespace is sparsely occupied with Mondrian-

like abstractions, white grids, and primary-colored cubes. The invisible collision geometry is out of sync with its graphical representation: the collision walls are several virtual feet behind the white lattices. The effect splits our attention between virtual physics and virtual graphics, because one is out of phase with the other. The player slips in and out of gamespace, like a distracted ghost clipping through a wall as it breezes along a black corridor. A blue cube differentiates itself from the static geometry as it slides beyond the lattices. Approaching the cube and it turns to leap, ferociously snarling and barking. Attempt to flee and it pursues to assault the player, and reset the game. Replay. When the player collides with an invisible trigger at a certain location in gamespace, the blue cube's programmed behavior is visibly disrupted as the new seek-and-destroy function is called. Its logic of spatial dominance drips from every translation. It is both funny and startling. It is uncanny how a generic object can exude a drive without desire through programmatically spatialized aggression, violence without malice. On the one hand it is frivolously familiar: collision detection, path-finding, and pursuit attacks are common in videogames. On the other hand, it is eerily threatening because it evokes a sensation that we have experienced this thing before.

The stroke of genius in *Slipgate* is shut up in the basement. If the player drifts into an invisible elevator to descend a level, dozens of primary cubes of various shape and size mob and engulf her with grating color and sound quickly returning her to the tranquil black beginning of the game... where the blue cube is again pacing past the lattices. A gambler's itch moistens the player's hand upon the mouse. If only she could play well enough, she might subdue all this garishly boisterous *stuff*. What is finally threatening about *Slipgate* is not the symbolic violence committed against the player or her non-present avatar, but the violence it orders against itself, in the operational breakdown of gamespace. In most games the

player has to save some sort of world, even if it a simple ordering of *Tetris* blocks, but here it is the game construct itself that needs saving. As she watches the blue cube pacing, it becomes apparent that the player appears no differently, no less procedural than that very cube, from the perspective of gamespace. Exert dominance, lose or win, it does not matter—but move, click, and enmesh oneself in the matrix, even if, especially, if it begins to fall apart around you.

The Jodi team was the first to create publicly discussed “net art,” formal works made with the internet protocols and artifice. Jodi published [www.jodi.org](http://www.jodi.org) online after they returned to the Netherlands from Silicon Valley in 1993 at the start of the dot-com boom. (This was a year before Netscape, the first commercial web browser, became widely available.) Jodi uploaded an ASCII image of a hydrogen bomb into that webpage where the html code should be. When a web browser tried to load the page, it was displayed as a garbled combination of links and characters. If the user viewed the page source, the html code directly, she could see the hydrogen bomb drawn out as an ASCII image. Under normal circumstance, the browser parses the html code and constructs human-readable web pages. At Jodi.org the behind-the-scenes of these operations, their hidden forms and quirks, suddenly emerged on the surface of the screen.

It is worth noting that *Space Giraffe* by Jeff Minter and *Untitled Game* by Jodi both dissect the game community’s fixation on graphics and dependency on logical Cartesian space. However, they conduct their investigation from opposite directions. Jodi formally interrogates the medium from outside the game industry, as net artists. Minter formally interrogates the medium from its core within the game industry. *Space Giraffe* uses “Neon,” the default music visualizer for the Xbox 360, which was built by Minter himself. *Space Giraffe* uses an absurdly excessive tactic—it

doesn't break the graphics card, but on the contrary—it successfully juices so much performance out of it that it ends up parodying itself, in a campy and inhuman digital fireworks show. *Untitled Game* uses a radically reductive tactic instead. It launches a frontal attack—it breaks the graphics engine down to get its moiré patterns and cascading waves of beautiful noise.

*Untitled Game* and *Space Giraffe* expose the noisy materiality of the medium in unusual, awkward patterns that challenge our human sense and conventional expectations, but they are not entirely out of reach. Confronting the visual confusion on the screen, the player can detect the underlying order of the *Quake* engine in a novel way—to detect this order actually becomes the game. The player is forced to experimentally discover patterning in how the pixilated moiré effect roils around and eats itself. All this seems impossible at first, but like games in which players pretend to be blind so they may navigate urban spaces in new ways (using smell, touch, and hearing); players of formal games realize that there are entire worlds of the medium lying dormant just beneath the surface of popular conventions of space and control. The player of a formal work must parse the visual impression on a different level than the usual illusion of receding space, but how does this actually occur? Gamespace becomes sensible beyond its conventional shapes by leveraging more of the sensual capacity of the player's body. The "wetware" of the player's sensorimotor system becomes a kind of co-processor along with the hardware. "Affectivity" is accomplished, according to Mark Hansen, a new media critic, as "the capacity of the body to experience itself as 'more than itself' and thus to deploy its sensorimotor power to create the unpredictable, the experimental, the new. [...] affectivity comprises a power of the body that cannot be assimilated to the habit-driven associational logic governing perception."<sup>26</sup> The player's knowledge of FPS game conventions, the usual goal-oriented behavior mapped onto a receding

cinematic space, helps her interpret her heightened awareness of the affective sensations of her sensual-visual-cognitive loop. If the player devotes sufficient energy to parse the surface chaos, the virtual boundaries, such as the walls of rooms and hallways eventually become detectable or readable, as if she is brushing up against them in her mind. The once-smooth artifice of a hallway or floor again breaks through the spilling data blocks. In a sense she is not only playing *Untitled Game*, but also all FPS games, as she playfully assesses her immediate experience against her cumulative knowledge of the genre. This is how the videogame avant-garde facilitates players to reflexively *play with technoculture* rather than merely within its channels of flow.

Formal exploration can also proceed in the opposite direction of Jackson Pollock and Jodi's work. Instead of crystallizing around material and sensual noise, they crystallize around cultural concepts and ideas—reducing the material until there is nothing left. Conceptual art concentrates on the cultural conventions of form. The conventional act of applying paint was taken to the conceptual extreme in Sol Lewitt's instructional pieces. The entire piece of *Wall Drawing #46* (1970) is the instruction: "Vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly." To be viewed, the piece must actually be constructed, making the viewer the artist (or at least craftsmen). Could it be that conceptual art is actually the most "material" because viewers must actually buy or acquire materials, touch them, gather them up, and structure them into artworks, rather than just walk up to artworks and stare at them freely and empty-handed? In the case of videogames this strategy would require players not simply to play someone else's game, but to interpret and code the original artist's design document into a game.



Figure 2-11 *MMORPG Tycoon* simulates the development of a massively multiplayer game, including monitoring forums where players complain about design choices.

Not about building a game from scratch, *MMORPG Tycoon* (2008) still turns designing and managing a game into the game itself. *MMORPG Tycoon* was Trevor Powell's entry into a procedural gameplay contest by The Independent Gaming Source, TIGSource.com. The player manages a subscription-based MMORG with thousands of procedurally generated "players." The richest multilayered moment of playing *MMORPG Tycoon* is visiting the procedurally generated forums where subscribers complain about decisions that the player has made. Hardcore players wish for and rave about bigger challenges, but newbie subscribers complain about neglect. The player must create the world map and tweak the master stats of quests,



racism, and classes. In the process, the player explores, and questions, “good game design,” in conjunction with long-term business acumen versus quick profit.

## Videogame Kitsch

What was formally avant-garde yesterday may be systematized into transparent formulas today. Dadaist cut-and-paste has become commonplace techniques in editing programs. What is formalist one day is formulaic the next. And the reverse: a cliché film technique of 1940 can be surprisingly disruptive in 2010. Like a binary star, formulaic art is antithetical to formalist art, but these arts are in a constant orbit of the other. Stuart Moulthrop advocates taking a formalist position to new media as modernists took with painting. The techniques of the avant-garde should constantly be elaborated and renewed in exploring new media. Moulthrop advises, “cyberspace is not a storybook or a moving picture but a complex virtual environment that should never be allowed to become second nature.”<sup>27</sup> The issue of formulas brings us square within the cocooning and formulaic domain of kitsch.

Kitsch is the term that Greenberg used to describe easily consumable media, or more precisely media that do not lead us to sense or reflect on the nature of the medium. Kitsch is anti-formal. Describing this phenomenon in America of 1939, “*Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. [...] Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy.”<sup>28</sup> The achievement of a universal literacy comes at the cost of simplification. Any widespread system of representation is only possible through sticky patterning, repetition, and formulas. Kitsch

condenses and engrains rituals. The diversity of knowledge and richness of those rituals suffer from oversimplification. Kitsch is culturally regressive for Greenberg, not because it is popular, but because it is derivative and formulaic:

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. [...] Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same.<sup>29</sup>

Ideally — from both the producer's and consumer's point of view — consumers of kitsch should know exactly what to do, how to feel, what to see, and how to react to it. Ironically, this predetermined, authorial control happens to be Ebert's criterion for great art. A film love scene crescendos with the music, rain drenching lovers, and everyone is spent and satisfied, including the audience.



Figure 2-12 The match three jewels genre and hyperreal shooter genres show the breadth of videogame kitsch in terms of theme and gameplay.

Kitsch didn't die in the transitional period of the 1960s to the 80s, but rapidly proliferated. Matei Călinescu sees the global spread of kitsch into new emerging

markets as one of the best indicators that “second” or “third world” countries are well on their way toward “modernization.” In “first world” and postmodern cultures, however, kitsch permeates. It leaks through every crevice of life in technoculture, from social networks to casual videogames. Kitsch flows and kitsch provides catharsis, according to Călinescu:

In the postmodern age, kitsch represents the triumph of the principle of immediacy—immediacy of access, immediacy of effect, instant beauty. [...] the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended determinacy, its vague “hallucinatory” power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy “catharsis.”<sup>30</sup>

Discussions about videogames that make players cry at the end of level 17 are about how videogames could become better formalized into kitsch products—how they could flow or provide catharsis more readily. Regrettably, most game scholars are only a small step beyond this belief when they advocate that the function of videogames is to hand deliver feelings, models, or arguments, from gamemakers to players in an anticipated way—this is not a description of an artistic medium, but only a “communication theory” of a medium. To generate and sustain flow is to employ formulas that have become second nature. Nintendo and Apple produce, and facilitate, the most powerful kitsch products today, easing millions of new gamers and whole families into the medium. The multinational company may be seen as spreading videogame literacy, on the one hand, but Nintendo could also be criticized for greatly reducing how popular culture thinks about (or doesn’t think about) the medium, on the other hand.

It is inevitable that the game industry would condense game literacy around a reductive set of formulas. The film industry is able to resist these trends more effectively because of its more dynamic large-scale production models. It is precisely the role of the avant-garde to resist this reduction and expand the field of formal possibilities. Videogame formulas manage to very slowly and incrementally shift through game studio investment, even though this investment is still far more conservative than in the film industry. When the film industry produces a creative but commercially unsuccessful work, analogous to the videogame, *Psychonauts*, the filmmakers are still loudly and critically praised for enriching the medium rather than being criticized for not making enough profit.

Radical formal works are the opposite of formulaic. By definition, they deviate from established formulas, although they must rely on some cultural conventions to be understandable as videogames. Such game take extra work to play; to use Aarseth's term, they are more ergodic. As a result, they yield extra rewards for those able and willing to play. Greenberg compares the avant-garde work of Picasso with that of Repin, a kitsch painter in Russia:

But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso's painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the "reflected" effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the "reflected" effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator's unreflective enjoyment. Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*.<sup>31</sup>

Radical formalism can be used to push the medium into sublime play, but it can also be used to examine the reductive set of conventions of mainstream games. It can be tactically aimed to surgically examine conventions that are transparently reproduced in endless games. Formal practice can expose the impulses or “causes,” to use Greenberg’s term, which flow-inducing games formalize into a gravy-like language of prepackaged effects. Formalism is most visibly interrogative of kitsch when it isolates a single game convention.



Figure 2-13 *Adam Killer* allows players to unravel the common shooter mechanic by affording it in immediate and overflowing abundance.

*Adam Killer* (1999-2001) is a game that isolates and exposes a cause and effect loop common to the FPS genre. *Adam Killer* is by Brody Condon and built with the

*Half-Life* engine. Gamespace is filled with an array of idling “Adams” wearing white clothes on a white floor and background. Rows and rows of breathing, unspoiled virtual bodies seem factory-distributed for slaughter: dozens of adult clones without minds to gun down. Images of Adam smear and leave trails just like the bullets and blood. *Adam Killer* condenses play to a single action. There is no waiting, no need to move or improve. The act of shooting is reduced to a piston-like twitch. Soon everything dies, including the desire to continue clicking toward an ever-receding electronic closure. Whereas most FPS games proceduralize players toward the effect of electronic closure, *Adam Killer* does the reverse: revealing the cause of this common effect. It is as if the player gains access to the loose threads and conceptual origins of the genre—basic gameplay elements before they are closed up within a seductive and cozy reward cycle. The player is invited to play out a fantasy of slaughter, which leads to a kind of supersaturation, and eventually a revulsion toward the causes of the fantasy. That is the goal of this new kind of videogame. Condon created *Adam Killer* as a reaction to the Columbine Massacre:

[*Adam Killer*] was made not long after the Columbine killings. A hardcore gamer at the time, Brody and a friend “were looking through a list of victims and laughing, deciding who we would have shot and not shot had we been in the killer’s position. Then I realized that I had no connection to media images I saw on the news and their actual context and meaning. Death had become a floating signifier.”<sup>32</sup> For Brody, producing *Adam Killer* allowed him to express “intuitive gestures” through one of the entertainment media responsible for his desensitization, as a form of therapy. His aim was to re-associate himself with the real element of carnage behind mass murder in the media. He says “As soon as *Adam Killer* was functional, I sat down and shot Adam again and again for about an hour. Every time I stepped back and looked at the carnage,

all the bloody Adams on the floor, I felt a sense of release and peace, like all was right with the world.”

*Adam Killer* de-aestheticizes death. It reveals how slaughter is usually glamorized (and heavily managed) in games by continuously drowning you in it in a physically and cognitively nauseating way. The clever part of *Adam Killer* is that it only works by relying on the player’s behavioral programming to play it out. It lets players exercise the expected autistic mechanism of the shooting mechanic in games *too effectively*. Shooter killing is always at the service of flow in games. Therefore, shooting is always limited and reinforced as an intermittent, rather than constant, player behavior. But in *Adam Killer*, shooting is constantly and seductively encouraged. According to psychologists Loftus and Loftus in *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Videogames*, there are two basic types of player reinforcement: continuous and partial. Continuous reinforcement is when a certain behavior is always rewarded: a rat presses a lever and a pellet of food will always appear. Partial reinforcement occurs intermittently, sometimes randomly. Almost all videogame use partial reinforcement, as the player must wait, retry, and rethink her strategy in the system. As Loftus and Loftus note:

game designers have apparently stumbled on the optimal strategy for reinforcing people so they (like the rat that keeps pressing) will continue [playing the game].<sup>33</sup> What this means in the world of video games is that reinforcement will be somewhat unpredictable. [...] For example, the player might achieve three complete boards in *Pac-Man* only once every ten times, or so, that he or she plays. [...] These irregular schedules of reinforcement are, in part, what cause video games to be so compelling and irresistible.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike *Pac-Man*, reinforcement and reward in *Adam Killer* is continuous and constant. By involving the player in the constant construction and control of the representation the game is extremely demanding, but at the same time “un-reinforcing” of its own illusion. It forces you to deconstruct yourself as a player as you play. It is so transparent and immersive there is no way to resist until you simply can’t it play any longer. The player pushes through the illusion to come to grips with the underside of the action. Becoming disinterested in her own activity she prickles against her own isolated and revealed unconscious drives that have impelled similar actions up till now.

*Adam Killer* does not attempt to culturally cattle prod the medium “forward” by riding out a shocking taboo, like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* Instead, *Adam Killer* yanks the edges of the medium “back,” and into focus, so we can see what it is already doing. It is reflexively shocking rather than transparently shocking. The design affords a real-time interrogation of the videogame form materially (in the abject overflow of the shooting mechanic), sensually (in the visceral reaction to that overflow), and conventionally (how a technocultural critique might emerge from the experience).

## **Videogames, the Desperate Art**

In the Romantic era, “art” rose in prominence to become “Art” classified alongside the cultural categories of Religion, Philosophy, and Science. Previously, the term was “the arts,” an ancient concept meaning skill and mastery, as in the art of war, love, or conversation. The shift that occurred with Art in the Romantic era: becoming a general category of media and of media experience, happened to painting in the Modern era. Before modernism “painting” did not connote grandeur



and status as a medium in and of itself. Painting was a material choice not especially distinct from clay or paper. With modernism, painting culturally became a de facto medium. It became Painting with a capital P.



Figure 2-14 *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-63) combined historical genres of French painting into one canvas, which helped foster the concept of Painting with a capital “P”.

One of the strategies by which artists transformed painting into Painting was to combine the major genres into single works. By absorbing its own history and becoming self-referential, painting was able to distinguish itself from other mediums materially, sensually, and culturally. Manet’s first major painting was *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (The Luncheon on the Grass) completed in 1863. To its audience, *Le déjeuner* appeared misshapen in its material construction and its use of cultural conventions.

It references Renaissance masters like Raphael, but juxtaposes nude women into a setting of gentlemen in contemporary dress. The skin of the foreground nude appears washed out, as if lit by a flash bulb. The bathing figure behind is a bit too large resulting in a perspectival inconsistency in the convention of depth. Broad swaths of color in the background are loosely patched together revealing the canvas texture beneath. Its major move was to combine the major genres of still life, nude, landscape, contemporary portrait, and classical style. But not only did it combine them, it did so expansively upon a canvas measuring over 80 by 100 inches. Paintings of this magnitude were previously reserved for culturally grand “history paintings,” such as major battles. It was not a historical event that it collected, but the history of painting itself. Flaubert stated, “every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface” of Painting.<sup>35</sup> It is a single work, yet also a mini-museum of painting as it existed up to that point. Greenberg’s protégé, Michael Fried:

I interpret Manet’s multiple and often overlapping references to the art of the past as evidence of an attempt both to represent a certain vision of the authentic French tradition and to surpass that tradition in the direction of a universalizing or a totalizing of the enterprise of painting.<sup>36</sup>

Because the painting was a compendium of conventions, they bumped against each other in the experience of viewing. It was interior and exterior, a portrait and a still life, historical in pose, but contemporary in dress, it had mismatching perspectives. Through internal contrast and synthesis, people could palpably see for the first time that a single painting could reflect back upon all other paintings. Eventually, the art establishment, the salon public, and even the general public (in France) accepted Manet’s move. As Hal Foster put it, formalist works like *Le déjeuner* and those after it

had a combined “effect that soon allowed painting to be imagined as Painting with a capital P.”<sup>37</sup> Although, obviously, he did not transform the medium single-handedly, this has led to the association of Manet with the advent of modernist art. To use computational rhetoric, through Manet, the medium entered a positive feedback loop. Genres could now aggregate over time, mixing and multiplying. Artists could now continually rediscover and appropriate representational practices that are antiquated for that medium. Something to remember is that the medium of painting that Manet summarized in 19th century France was conventionally very different than it is today. Painting would be many factors harder (if not impossible, at least for non-artists to imagine), to summarize into single works today. This is primarily because even within France, or the U.S., Painting is no longer culturally encoded within a predominantly French, American, European, or Western history, with many famous painters emerging from China, for example, reflecting its ascendance as a superpower.

The global nature of videogames makes any totalizing visions tremendously daunting to formulate, considering the diversity of genres, technologies, histories, and peoples. How can videogames be formally summarized? How could gameplay that is fractured into so many cultural patterns be pulled together into one positive feedback loop? What are all of videogame genres, anyway? Mark Wolf has classified forty-two genres based upon on their interactivity model: *Abstract, Adaptation, Adventure, Artificial Life, Board Games, Capturing, Card Games, Catching, Chase, Collecting, Combat, Demo, Diagnostic, Dodging, Driving, Educational, Escape, Fighting, Flying, Gambling, Interactive Movie, Management Simulation, Maze, Obstacle Course, Pencil-and-Paper Games, Pinball, Platform, Programming Games, Puzzle, Quiz, Racing, Role-Playing, Rhythm and Dance, Shoot ‘Em Up, Simulation, Sports, Strategy, Table-Top Games, Target, Text Adventure, Training Simulation, and Utility*.<sup>38</sup> If can we

provisionally accept that Wolf's list is representative of the medium's history and present, how would one incorporate these into a single great work, or even a series of works?

It helps to take a step back. When we hear claims that videogames need their own *Citizen Kane*, it is to advance this capitalizing concept of Videogames with a capital V. But these advocates do not understand the entire implication. *Citizen Kane* did combine many techniques and genres that film had developed up to 1941 and in effect did totalize the medium. It also satisfied critics and popular audiences, although not immediately, as there was a temporal lag, just as with Manet's work. From a formal perspective, however, *Citizen Kane* is a hybrid of kitsch and formally reflexive and gaping, self-revealing art. Welles used formalist "tricks" subsumed into well-worn patterns of melodramatic tragedy. Audience expectations are piqued and satisfied, swept along in an exaggerated rise and fall of a protagonist due to his one weakness or "harmartia," to use the Aristotelian term. The videogame that corresponds to *Citizen Kane* would not be *Zelda*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Civilization*, *World of Warcraft*, or any of the suggestions floated by Jason Rohrer, Cliffy B, and so many others. The closest *Citizen Kane* videogames that have been assembled so far would be something along the lines of *Little Big Planet* or *WarioWare*.



Figure 2-15 *WarioWare* references an array of historical conventions from Nintendo games, but collapses them into a flow of self-similar, fast actions.

The *WarioWare* franchise by Nintendo is an agglomerate of random bits of videogame history, especially its own history. Each *WarioWare* level is a series of fast microgames in which players deduce what “classic” convention is being called for, and they immediately execute it. If a screen looks *Zelda*-like, run to the cave. *Punch Out* appears, jab Mike Tyson’s face. The breakthrough of *Le déjeuner* was that it was a nude, still life, landscape, and sketch of daily life all at the same time. *WarioWare* is not an actual compilation of a shooter, sports, RPG, pinball, platformer, etc. Genre conventions are reduced to simple mechanical actions, like a monkey just jumping through a series of hoops. Chaim Gingold observes in one example that, “The conventions of a RPG have been transformed into an action game: the cursor moves between menu items on its own accord, and you have to push the button to stop it at

the right option.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than totalizing history and genre, *WarioWare* parodies it in flat caricature. It would be a breakthrough if all the genres could remain intact when aggregated into one compendium. Its constantly frenetic pace simply places *WarioWare* at the opposite end of the speed spectrum from *flOw*, although their form is actually somewhat congruent. The formal property of painting as a static medium allows *Le déjeuner* to blend its genres in the same space while maintaining their historical diversity. The fact that videogames introduce not only time (as does film) but also player manipulation and action, poses ambitious challenges in totalizing the medium in space, time, and action, and more generally, in material, sense, and convention.

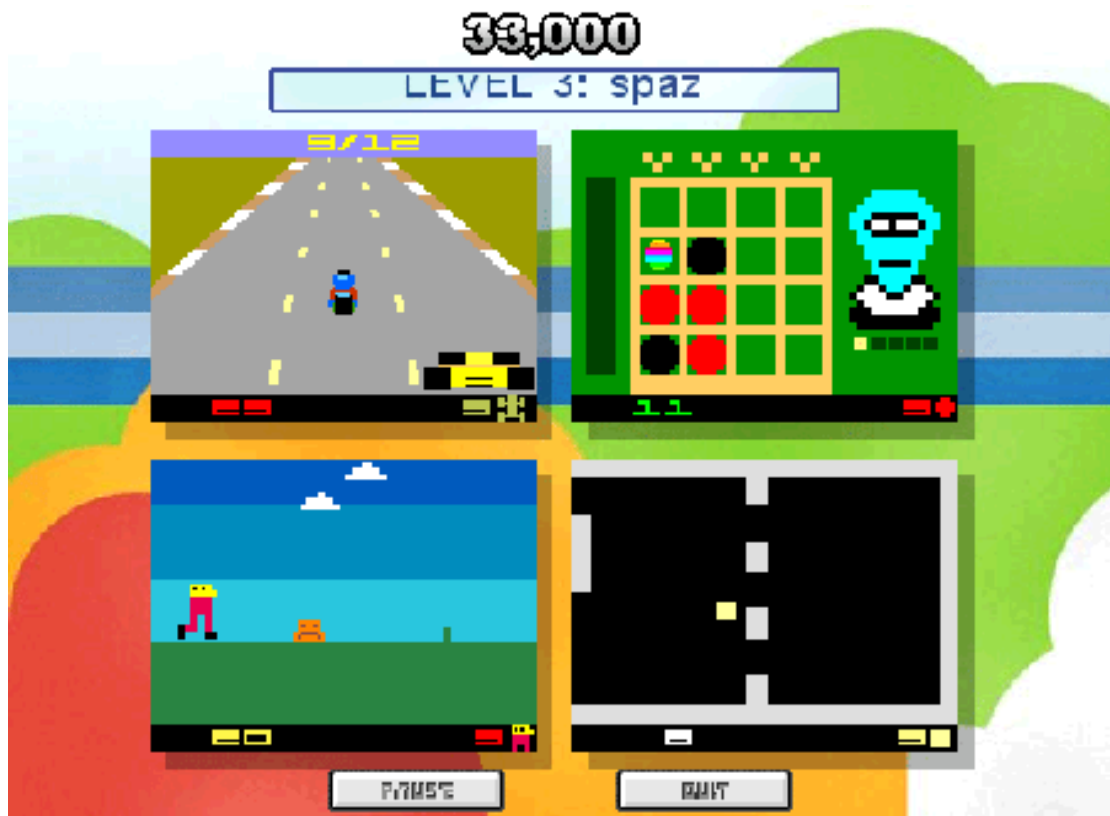


Figure 2-16 *Arcadia*, by Gamelab, enables play of four minigames simultaneously, totalizing the medium in a more comprehensively diverse way than *WarioWare* affords.

In *Arcadia* (2003) by Gamelab (a closed studio that was) headed by Eric Zimmerman, four minigames are played simultaneously.<sup>40</sup> The minigames are simplified genre abstractions from the 70s and 80s: *Pong*, *Tetris*, baseball, racing, and so on. *Arcadia* is distinct from *WarioWare* in its construction of space, time, and action. *WarioWare* consists of microgames, which last only seconds, whereas *Arcadia*'s minigames last up to a minute or more. In *WarioWare* microgames are played sequentially in the same space. In *Arcadia* four minigames are played simultaneously in four onscreen panels, with eight different minigames cycling within them. This spatial-temporal reversal drastically transforms the flow. In *WarioWare*, players scramble to abstract the microgame logic to rapidly progress through a series of actions: jump, gas, select, forward, and so on. *Arcadia* is about maintaining difference between actions rather than collapsing them into the same kind of action. The result creates a strong sensual and conventional contrast. The contour of flow in the *Pong* panel spills into the platformer panel. A well-deflected shot blip-blop-bleeps into a badly timed jump. You realize you can't change lanes in *Connect Four*. *Arcadia* is not an anti-flow game but one reflexive of it. Subtle proprioceptions of preparing to "move there" in various genres rub against each other. The slight differences in pacing, eye scanning and fiddling one's fingers are perceptually enlarged in real-time. Gamelab later released *Arcadia Remix* (2006) to apparently rectify *Arcadia*'s deviation from the flow ideal.<sup>41</sup> Instead of playing four minigames right away, a neatly manageable two must be played successfully for a long training period beforehand. *Arcadia Remix* is not as provocative or fun, while Gamelab touts it as more "addictive." Like *WarioWare*, the remix version of the game has reduced a diverse set of conventions into the predictable flow. It went from a provocative formal artwork, to a flow trainer for multi-tasking skills.

In “Movies, the Desperate Art,” film critic Pauline Kael stated, “Other arts show an internal logic in their development, the constant solving of aesthetic challenges; films have changed simply by following the logic of the market.”<sup>42</sup> She was writing in 1956, when avant-garde and arthouse filmmakers suffered from Painting-envy, just as some videogame enthusiasts suffer Film-envy today. At its dawn, photography pined to be painting, as still lifes were set up for long exposures on chemical plates. One of the most interesting formal questions is what consumers and game academics already ask: How can we realize videogames? The only difference is that formal artists approach that same question more openly. The most difficult answer to that question is: Create Videogames with a capital V. The example I have listed, *Arcadia*, only hints at what that might mean. *Rom Check Fail* by Farbs provides a few more hints. Perhaps as more of these gestures arise, we will learn how to let go of the flow long enough to play beyond it? Can we realize what the medium is, what lies in all its folds, striating patterns, and inhuman territories? Or, will videogames, as Kael suggested of film, only follow the logic of the market and continue to simulate technoculture itself? If we can learn to appreciate, to play, and to design games beyond their capacity for flow, who knows, maybe the next “medium” invented — whatever that technocultural Frankenstein could be — will suffer no end of Videogame-envy.

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1 Flow, as a media concept, dates back, at least, to Raymond Williams who analyzed television programming as ideally maintaining a smooth flow of images streaming to the viewer.

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3 The idea that there must be an irregularity to the flow line was first fleshed out in game design terms by Noah Falstein in “Understanding Fun—the Theory of



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- 39 Gingold, Chaim. "What Warioware Can Teach Us About Game Design." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (2005), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0501/gingold/>.
- 40 Gamelab. "Arcadia." (2008), <http://www.gamelab.com/game/arcadia>.
- 41 Gamelab: "With the recent launch of Arcadia Remix, we've retired this original version of the game. But it lives on in our game-playing hearts..." It is regrettable that when they existed, Gamelab decommissioned what was clearly a more formal, experimental work.
- 42 Kael, Pauline. "Movies: The Desperate Art." In *Film: An Anthology*. Edited by Daniel Talbot. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959: 66.

## CHAPTER 3: RADICAL POLITICAL: PLAYING WITH TECHNOCULTURE

### What is “Radical Political”?

When *radical* and *political* are juxtaposed, mental images of physically violent, worldly actions tend to pop up: 19th century revolutionaries rushing barricades, bra burners of the 60s, and bomb throwers at the G20. In art, however, *radical* and *political* mean something different. Art, as a category, was *politicized* by radical art that resisted the limits and rules of that category. The radical political avant-garde challenged the cultural elite ruling the conceptual domain of art. Today, the political avant-garde challenges another domain. It does not inject high culture with low culture, such as urinals, jokes, and so on. There is no need. Instead, it takes entertainment, and injects what is still lower. Postmodern culture acts as if its endless sea of signs omits nothing, but the political avant-garde conjures what is still barred from popular media. They unwork and expose popular entertainment as rigidly structured by ideologies of desire, fear, and technical control. In their most fascinating moments, they allow us to exist with one another and with gamespace, outside of the technicity of being, and beyond the desire to equate being with power and procedural presence.

Technoculture is not as fluid as it fantasizes itself to be, a fantasy epitomized in games. We feel free and fluid in the envelope of gamespace. Step out of the flow, however, and we see that, in their popular form, videogames facilitate submission to a libidinal flow of power. Desire for hallucinatory ego-mastery in a proceduralized space is one of the new “traditions” that the political avant-garde challenges. These are very different taboos to turn over than historical bourgeois sensibilities toward

art, in which art was valued as the highest form of cultural edification or spiritual expression. The political avant-garde historically challenged the institution of art. Now it challenges the “institution” of technocultural entertainment. Institution in this context is about as descriptive as calling the temperature outside an “institution.” Historically, the political avant-garde transformed art from within, working within the institution they were opening and transforming. Today, it is appropriate to worm into and out of entertainment, as that is the diffuse and networked institution that the political avant-garde is opening and transforming.

### Political Affordance of Games



Figure 3-1 Jacques Servin snuck code into *SimCopter* causing “mimbos” to appear in gameplay, causing Maxis to recall the game.

Jacques Servin infiltrated Maxis, Will Wright's studio, which was acquired by Electronic Arts in 1997. Servin was a programmer on *SimCopter* (1996), a helicopter flight simulation game, before he co-founded The Yes Men. Servin inserted some code into the game to replicate "mimbos," shirtless and Speedo-strapped muscle men, on certain days of the year. The game only depicted women in a sexual way, according to Servin, so he redressed this imbalance proactively and with celebratory flourish. Flaunting some programmatic panache the mimbos' nipples render with special effects reserved for fog-piercing runway landing lights. When mimbos collide with another character, it triggers mutually smooching animations. Servin's hack was discovered after *SimCopter* sold 50,000 copies and Servin was fired. Servin's procedural performance may disrupt the flow too much for gameplay to continue at all for some players. According to normative attitudes in game studies, this is a case of "breaking" the magic circle, an "anti-game" or "counter-game." However, as I will argue shortly, the hack actually amplifies the magic circle of play by folding into it various aspects of the "real" world. The private space of a single player game is usually quarantined from social politics. But here suddenly, it's as if a peeping Tom has come a tapping at your window. A gay artist's token of reality comes swinging in to join the private little party. The mainline sexualization of women in games is humorously augmented with the sexualization of men (homophobia in gamer culture has rendered the irruption of homoeroticism itself an uncanny event). The player's hallucinate desire to and control gamespace, suddenly shares centrality with a boisterous, homosexual, alien desire. The player's prominence, power, and center-of-attention, is smooshed over and shared with a strange and comical fantasy of another man. The magic circle is impregnated with the Other.



on the NASDAQ market. An internal check system allowed players to record their misinformation campaign and track the escalating PR nightmare that the corporation faced. The game featured a virtual world players could log into to perform similarly as they would if *Toywar* were only a fictional game. In the virtual world, players could chat through a virtual radio, post messages, check internal email, spend and spread in-game currency around, and even launch “media bombs” onto other sites on the internet (bundled packages of images, legal statements, damning customer complaints, etc.). On one hand, because it was framed as a game, it generated wild permutations of creativity. On the other hand, it promoted groupthink, bent on extermination. Players filed real counter cases against the company. Callers overloaded the customer service department of eToys.com. Designers published hundreds of websites to humiliate the company and confuse potential customers, partners, clients, as well as media outlets that were attempting to cover the “event.” Picking up on this, players pretended to be bankrolled investors infiltrating newsgroups to spread disinformation about the company. A flurry of articles about *Toywar* appeared in national and local newspapers, from *The New York Times* to *Le Monde*.

Within weeks of launching *Toywar*, the price of the eToys stock dropped by half and remained in freefall. Economists point out all this occurred in 1999, when the dot.com bubble was bursting anyway, so the tangible impact of the videogame is difficult to determine. Whatever the cause, the eToys corporation did declare bankruptcy. (In February 2009, Toys “R” Us bought the URL.) etoy claims that *Toywar*, “was the most expensive performance in art history: \$4.5 billion dollars.”<sup>1</sup> etoy insists that the “achievement” was not theirs alone, and that it really belongs to the exuberant participation of players. It was the players who created and continually redefined the nature of the game as they played it. The artists left the



game open so that this might happen, “We have no idea what people do who meet here. They talk to each other. They can make deals. It’s a living system which generates an impact.”<sup>2</sup> There were no official rules to the game, but there was a provocative theme, succulent lure, and a persistent gameworld for players to congregate and from which to launch into the real world. All of these things seeded and established a loose framework for *Toywar* to grow as a living work, but the game was an organism and product of its players.

The rhetoric of games is widely used in the corporate world, election campaigns, propaganda, and in foreign policy to manipulate discourse, often to justify aggressive policies through the abstraction of winning. *Toywar* appropriates this militarization of business as a big spectacular game, and manifests it literally. The artists interpreted the legal attack by the eToys corporation as an invitation to play. Where eToys was speaking the language of the law, etoy interpreted it as a kind of *metalanguage*, recalling Gregory Bateson’s observation in “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” that in animal play the “playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.” The abstraction of play absolved some of the guilt people might normally feel in destroying a random corporation with people’s life savings invested in its stock (a more “deserving” corporation could not have been found?). The absolution of “playing” with eToys is compounded by the fact that the first bite, or nipping invitation to play, depending on how you look at it, was in fact, enacted by the company. That gesture effectively reframed all player actions into mere responses and reactions. The asymmetrical nature of the aggression conjured by the game reveals the potent violence the avant-garde is capable of when it appropriates the nature of digital capitalism and contemporary warfare, and tangibly manifests them within a magic circle.

The way *Toywar* blends fantasy, reality, and new media, reveals just how much the radical political avant-garde has changed since its theatrical events of 1916, which will be examined shortly. Political avant-garde games like *Toywar* owe much to other contemporary avant-gardes that flood, clog, and work over technoculture within their magic circles. The work and theory of the Critical Art Ensemble throughout the 90s developed and put into practice key strategies that have resonated with many contemporary avant-garde figures. In fact, Critical Art Ensemble has directly asserted these technocultural figures, are in fact, “avant-garde”:

For many decades, a cultural practice has existed that has avoided being named or fully categorized. Its roots are in the modern avant-garde, to the extent that participants place a high value on experimentation and on engaging the unbreakable link between representation and politics. Perhaps this is a clue as to why this practice has remained unnamed for so long. Since the avant-garde was declared dead, its progeny must be dead too. Perhaps this brood is simply unrecognizable because so many of the avant-garde's methods and narratives have been reconstructed and reconfigured to such an extent that any family resemblance has disappeared along with its public face.<sup>3</sup>

Videogame culture, technology, and sensorium, bring a lot to the table for the political avant-garde. Consider how *Toywar* employs the methods and narratives of games in negotiable ways. The rules might be loose and unformed, but the appeal of goals, virtual currency exchanges, player ranking and boasting, were energy currents that swept and warped real world correlates into a flow. It might have been

a mirror, but at least it was a mirror that players could stand in front as well as walk behind, a mirror they could bend, like a science museum mirror.



Figure 3-3 SWARM, who orchestrated DDoS and telephony attacks against the U.S. border patrol and the Minutemen, controlled the narrative entirely, leaving participants with little room to improvise and diverge in their activity.

The celebratory nature of play and wasteful exuberant energy was aroused in *Toywar* through its videogame rubric. It's useful to compare how the swarming multitude operates outside of videogame rubrics. For example, in 2005 a group called the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) wished to make it easy for anyone in the world to support the Zapatista movement in Mexico as well as contribute to actions that aggravate the stability of U.S.-Mexico border laws. So Brett Stalbaum, Carmin Karasic, Stefan Wray, and Ricardo Dominguez (a former member of Critical Art Ensemble), created SWARM (South West Action to Resist the Minutemen) for the purpose. Using a distributable applet, they enabled thousands of people to flood the websites of California and Arizona Minutemen organizations, "Save Our State"

initiatives, and political representatives who support tough immigration reform. They used EDT's favorite tactic, a FloodNet application to direct denial-of-service attack against various websites:

The software we are using requests files from the servers of the targeted websites that are not found—files like Justice, Freedom, and the names of those who have died crossing the border. In effect you will see the error message—"files not found." The sit-in will interfere with and slow down the servers of these various groups and individuals—much like a physical sit-in slows down the movement of people in buildings or on streets. In addition, the administrators of the servers will see logs of the action where the names of those who have died crossing, and the requested files like justice, appear repeated thousands upon thousands of times.

For the sake of argument, let's say that *SWARM* and *Toywar* both engage in "electronic civil disturbance," to use Electronic Disturbance Theater's term. The nature of the disturbance is markedly different in each event. *Toywar* used the affordance of play so that the experience would oscillate from the fictional to the real and back. In *Toywar* participation was open. Players diverged in their actions, some creating fake businesses and websites, others feeding news aggregators with misinformation; while others simply socialized through the fictional space with other players. Using FloodNet, *SWARM* never opened up the methods or narrative structure of the event in its orientation, interpretation, or the actions it afforded. The participants of *SWARM* were given less chance to reinterpret and rewrite the rules of the event as they performed it, compared to the participants of *Toywar*, who were explicitly given that opportunity, responsibility, and encouragement. By momentarily disconnecting civil actions from reality and allowing them to form

however they could imagine in a magic circle, the form of those actions could proliferate into far more divergent patterns; and arguably, by doing so, be more politically effective in the end goal. *SWARM* made it all too easy, providing all the rules, means, and rhyme and reason, to perform in the event. Worlds didn't blend. Worlds weren't in play. If artists and gamers enable and encourage people to play with their own formation, logic, and force—which is what framing the event as gameplay does—artists are not only facilitating “electronic civil disturbance,” but they are distributing their own authority, agency, and power among the participants. That is the political affordance of games. Instead of just giving away fish, they enable people to find new kinds of fish.

## Play Redefined

The political videogame avant-garde really knows how to play. They play with art and politics, fictions and everyday life, blending and transforming these categories in the process. To willfully “hallucinate” with “an intermediate reality between phantasy and actuality is the purpose of play,” according to developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson.<sup>4</sup> The avant-garde expands this intermediary dimension and liminal purpose of play to draw technoculture into the magic circle. The political avant-garde does not really “blend worlds,” but shows us how worlds are already blended. Duchamp's urinal, *Fountain*, revealed and redefined the arbitrary, bureaucratic culture that officially ruled what was and what was not art. Duchamp pulled back the curtain on the Wizard of Oz, so to speak, exposing the reality behind the fiction, or the fiction behind the reality, depending on your perspective. Either way, art was a dirty, hybrid thing that now had to be “dealt with” as such—which explains much about the trials and tribulations of subsequent 20th century art.

Before we look at play in the hands of the avant-garde, we first need to understand play in simple terms. Play is a slippery animal. Play is hard to define, surprisingly plastic, and intolerably resistant to descriptive containment. Rather than seeing this as problematic, Brian Sutton-Smith sees these features as essential to the definition of play. In his book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, he prescribes: "Any earnest definition of play has to be haunted by the possibility that playful enjoinders will render it invalid." Salen and Zimmerman offer a definition in *Rules of Play*, often cited in the videogame community: "Play is free movement within a more rigid structure."<sup>5</sup> The more outside the mainstream that we look, the more this seems a dogmatic and vacuous description. To see play as contained movement is to see play from the perspective of the ruled structure. It is the master looking down on the slave. Play is reduced to something that it safely afforded by the graciousness of the rules. The rigid structure exists for play, but play does not exist for the rigid structure. We perform and participate with more than our movement when we play. We play with our being. We exercise our being when we play. To say that play is movement within rigid structures is to see play through the lens of electronic circuitry. It is a clinical, technocentric definition.

Play is inherently transformative of structure. Play that reflexes the very structure containing it is not some special case of "extreme" or "special case of play," as Salen and Zimmerman argue.<sup>6</sup> Play that reshapes the structures affording it is actually the only type of play. Sutton-Smith defines play as working beyond the rigid structure of successful adaptations. At the very end of his book, Sutton-Smith explains:

I define play as a facsimilization of the struggle for survival as this is broadly rendered by Darwin. Biologically, its function is to reinforce the organism's variability in the face of rigidification of successful adaptation.<sup>7</sup>

Sutton-Smith's definition contradicts the definitions of play touted in game studies. It is not the "rules of play" but the "play of rules." To organize our thinking about play, and for the sake of argument, let both definitions remain. There is play that only moves within structure, as game theorists argue. There is play that transforms the structure that is affording it, as artists understand. Now we may imagine play in two different orders.

First-order play is adherent to laws, tenets, goals, and procedures. Think of it as play according to computer logic. It is to play within the rules of a game in which good players are like obedient, model citizens. Creative commons guru, Lawrence Lessig, observes that, "code writers are essentially lawmakers." "Law" in this context is not like an ordinance against jaywalking or a decree that prohibits murder—these laws can be broken. "Law" in this context is analogous to physical and universal laws, like gravity or the speed of light. To not question the law, but maximize personal power within it is to be the model citizen player.

Second-order play is wholly aware of first-order play, although the reverse cannot be said.<sup>8</sup> Second-order play renders plastic the structures that first-order play is so slavishly beholden. Second-order play accesses the "law of code" directly, so that players surfeit administrative and socially normative powers of gamespace, to actually play with the system itself. Here forward when I refer to play it will usually be play of this second-order, because that is what play is primarily. Play is a force of flux we use to resist individually, socially, and procedurally established adaptations.

That is to state it in the negative. To restate in the positive: play enables us to *exist otherwise*. To expand upon Sutton-Smith, play flexes and reforms the biological-cultural phenomena of first-order play into new shapes. Play is *being in structural alterity*. Like quantum particles, play disappears and irrupts in odd shapes and at odd moments. The play ensures that its own domain remains in play.

“The challenge is,” to cite McKenzie Wark, “to play at play itself.”<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, it makes sense to say that the radical political avant-garde is being essentially playful when it plays *with*, more than *in*, the ritual-algorithmic structures of art, politics, or videogames. This provides an alternate handle than the tired, and misleading, tactical terms of “shock,” “negation,” and so forth. “Shock” and “negation” are how radical politics looks and feels like from a systemically conservative position, it is how second-order play might appear to first-order play. Whatever our adaptive customs, the political avant-garde reworks them, exposing their structural contingency and frailty. This opens up the immediacy of being in a way that is *other* than technocentric or adaptive—other than procedurally or ritually driven. Avant-garde play is called into places, situations, and relationships in ways that are unusual and non-adaptive for the people involved. Advancing play of the second-order, the avant-garde challenges our self-sustaining academic definitions which see play in functional terms of learning, progress, training, bonding, pedagogy, exercise, release, and expression. At the same time, second-order play undermines the popular, desired lack of any purpose or meaning in play.

If we only see videogames as vessels for first-order play, they remain safe as entertainment. First-order gameplay disallows player access to the capacities of games that will open up, fundamentally challenge, or transform technoculture. Videogames, as we normally envision them, and as we make them, become a



smooth, expansive surface to project our fantasies upon. What does not compute is omitted from the cultural equation. By securing the playground of videogames, players are barred from really playing with them, and end up only mirroring technocultural trends in the gameplay afforded. Literary and cultural critic, Terry Eagleton, frames this problem more generally. It is not only through videogames, but through digital culture that we safely construct the great mirror:

Culture had always been about signs and representations; but now we had a whole society which performed permanently before the looking-glass, weaving everything it did into one vast mega-text, fashioning at every moment a ghostly mirror-image of its world which doubled it at every point.<sup>10</sup>

We remix ourselves in a mirror-world of procedures that smooth over alterity. In normal games, players manifest the desires that are best serviced in, and exaggerated by, the simulation. We sense everything that exists, is available and familiar, configurable, and controllable. If only videogames were the escape that critics and politicians accuse them of being. Rather than escape, it is through everyday gameplay that we crystallize and sensationalize the very technocultural logic that permeates and defines our administered daily lives. Videogames caricature computational labor, office life, and knowledge work as they constrain engagement to first-order play. The appeal of ordinary videogames as that in their distorted reflection of technoculture, we find a purity and condensation of the technocultural flow that makes more poetic sense than the original, frenzied image. Second-order play delves back into that original frenzied image.

## Magic Circle of Game Studies as Paternalistic

The notion of a safe, infantile “play” versus a serious, cold, hard “reality” is a self-reinforcing, polarizing illusion. Our misunderstanding of what the magic circle meant historically exacerbates the problem. The established definition of the “magic circle,” is one of the major stumbling blocks. Within the magic circle, “play” is severed, like a slab of succulent fat, off from the red meat of “reality” outside the circle, leaving an eerily workable dichotomy. The magic circle is a pivotal concept in videogame studies. Like “flow” the term “magic circle” is not always explicitly used, but the idea is always present. It provides an axis around which the subjects of play, reality, work, and so on, turn within the discourse on videogames. The idea arrived by way of Johan Huizinga, an early 20th century Dutch anthropologist, especially his 1938 book, *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga did not coin the term “magic circle” but popularized a definition of it. For Huizinga, the magic circle describes a social frame, within which play operates. It evokes something kingly: ruling play while protecting it, allowing play to do its thing as long as it knows its place. Mostly, it is a boundary that divides play from everyday life:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.<sup>11</sup>

According to this traditional approach, the magic circle demands a willing suspension of disbelief. For people to play together in a consistently ritualized, imaginary construct there must be a certain amount of stability. From within the circle extraneous details are filtered out: the woodenness of a toy gun, or an uncanny valley walk cycle in a videogame. Other details are precociously added: bullets can “pew-pew” from that wooden gun, or from that finger tapping relentlessly on a plastic mouse.

Most game developers and popular critics insist on the sanctity and power of play. Play is treated with the reverence with which a spiritual medium might treat a ghostly visitor. Although these attitudes might be faithful and heartfelt, they are horribly misleading. They are treating play as if it were the fickle spirit of a dead child, perhaps their own youth, a waif to be placated, buttressed, and managed because it is so ephemeral and inert. Whatever they are talking about, it seems more of a wishful séance than play. The conceit is hidden in plain sight, a frailty cloaked in the boldest rhetoric extolling the powerful promise of play. Edward Castronova writes: “Virtual worlds represent a new technology that allows deeper and richer access [...] fantasy, myth, saga, states that have immense intrinsic value to the human person. Yet virtual worlds cannot provide these mental states if the *magic circle* [...] is eroded.”<sup>12</sup> If play is so powerful, why bring in the heavy guns to protect it? Critics are blind to their own pessimism. If the “deeper and richer” worlds Castronova envisions are so mythically powerful is it not possible that they might not be crushed by ordinary social reality, but enhanced or transformed by it, and vice versa? Why are we intent on constructing a Noah’s Ark of play that requires a double-logic: play sails unmolested over tumultuous cultural realities, but it is also a monumental vehicle that encases culture, delivering it new horizons. If religion is

the driving metaphor: we need a little more faith in the ability of these logics to play together.

### *Debunking the Freedom Rhetoric*

In the videogame community, Richard Bartle is the most prominent proponent of the magic circle as Huizinga drew it, as a line of prohibition and security. Speaking as one of the cultural originators of virtual reality itself, Bartle claims that we should eliminate the intrusions of the real into the virtual at all costs. Bartle co-programmed MUD, the first Multi-User Dungeon, with Roy Trubshaw who began the project in 1978 at the University of Essex. The MUD was conceived as a mashup of tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and early online chat rooms. As early developer and leader among the MMO industry, Bartle paints a prophetic vision:

MUD should be a place—a world—that let players *do* whatever they wanted to do (within the context of its physics), and *be* whatever they wanted to be (in the context of their own personality). The phrase I used was “open-ended.” If people wanted to play it as a game, as most perhaps would, then to them it would be a game; if, however they preferred to wander around enjoying the scenery or poking things with sticks, that was fine too. We would provide the world; the players could take from the experience of visiting whatever they had use for.<sup>13</sup>

The virtual is nearly always couched in the rhetoric of freedom. But the ticket to freedom is not to anywhere. Players are only allowed to desire a return to Eden. Apparently the wellspring of our cultural youth has moved from the “nature” of

virginal mountains, forests and streams, where it lived in the 19th and 20th centuries, to the “nature” of unspoiled technologies, game engines, networks, and controllers, where comfortably lives in the 21st century. Caught in a paradox, we wish to liberate videogames, our most prominent new mediator of reality, from the “oppression” of the very culture that created it. It is digital Rousseau, a Walden in the Matrix. We pine for that “virtual wild,” the return to a tech-enhanced childhood, “before” its corruption by the suppressive order of civilization. This rhetoric of freedom, peppered with anarcho-libertarianism, is a euphemism for play that is safe from what our culture fears most: stubborn alterity, the non-assimilatable Other, the Real. “Open-ended” is Orwellian doublespeak for the enclosure of fantasy. The prophesized domain is not anarchistic or libertarian, but bureaucratically censored to minimize alterity, difference, disruption, and divergence. The paradox is not surprising as the panoply of ideologies at work: anarchism, classic liberalism, capitalism, communism, and so on, are each defined by their internal contradictions of power. What is odd, however, is the willful ignorance of these prevalent and prevalently discussed (in fields other than videogame studies) contradictions.

For the radical political avant-garde, however, freedom has to be cracked apart and constantly exercised through media. They undermine an essential ideal of technoculture, one that Galloway and Thacker critique: “This gets to the heart of the freedom rhetoric. If it’s hardwired, is it still freedom? Instead of guaranteeing freedom, the act of hardwiring suggests a limitation on freedom.”<sup>14</sup> Galloway and Thacker go on to criticize the open-source movement. Although “information wants to be free,” that phrase does not grasp where the action is. We should realize and advocate for an “open runtime,” which prizes spontaneous iteration, open articulation, participatory practice. Why not manipulate code at runtime? Why not value protocological freedom, rather than only the “freedom” to tweak a database

entry, such as a tweet, or a Facebook status update? The battle of the radical political avant-garde is not over the freedom of expression, but over the freedom of use, freedom to redefine, freedom to disassemble, and to reassemble. Why not the freedom to fall apart?

It is eerie, how easy it is for representational freedom, or expressive freedom, to distract us and determine the scope of our demands and desires. For example, former Chief Technology Officer of Linden Lab, Cory Ondrejka speaking about *Second Life*, sees freedom as essentially the freedom to express:

Digital worlds exist as synthetic models and have no need for the constraints of the real world. This freedom allows digital worlds a vast design space of representational choices, ranging from near correspondence to the real world to complete abstraction. The digital world *Second Life* was designed to allow its residents enormous creative freedom and to be as broadly appealing as possible. *Second Life* chose to mirror the real world in many important aspects in order to provide a place that felt familiar and comfortable, while granting freedoms not possible in the real world.<sup>15</sup>

The claim may be genuinely felt, but the economic and social realities, biases and fantasies of power, are coded into the very fabric of *Second Life*. Acknowledging this fact would ruin the magic, so players instead seek rules and procedures to manage these economic and social structures for them, so they can swim in expressions of freedom rather than procedural or structural freedoms to reconfigure the world. Following the creators, we believe that the code will ensure our liberties and property as well as mitigate our disputes. To extend this line of thought: we don't want to worry what happens technologically when we send an email, make a bank

charge, or walk down the street with closed circuit cameras monitored by (increasingly computational) authorities. Most people don't want to critically reflect upon, author or exercise, ad hoc protocols for themselves as they engage the virtual. To *express* destruction or domination is "freedom" is enough, but to *reconfigure* the structures that underwrite that "freedom" of expression is a bridge too far.

### *The Fad of Rebellion*



Figure 3-4 In *State of Emergency* the enemy is "The Corporation," which the player battles by causing systemic chaos, cloaking consumption with the feeling of subversion.

Videogames usually present an ego space for the player to overcome alterity, to eliminate otherness, to assert structural authority over a system (either cleansing it or burning it down). Virtual worlds may be controlled, created, or destroyed in a

plethora of forms, from jewels and alphabets, to ghosts and guns, but each form contributes in concerted effort of control. A clever way to interpellate the player as the structural authority is to actually simulate the reverse: cloak the player as rogue warrior, cyborg mutant, WTO anarchist, psychotic killer. No hero is more conservative and kitsch than the rebel. This way the player can exert power, while wearing the guise of the underdog. She can have her cake and eat it too. *State of Emergency* simulates a world suppressed by the evil "Corporation" and makes systemic disruption the goal. Transgression is encoded by design. According to Eugene Thacker and Alexander Galloway, contrary to the rhetoric of rebellion, *State of Emergency* interpellates the player in a reverse role: "The computer skills necessary for playing either scenario amount to network management tasks. Either you are infiltrating the city and destabilizing key nodes, or you are fortifying such nodes. The lesson of *State of Emergency* is not that it promotes an anarchic ideology, but that, in the guise of anarchic ideology, it promotes computer and network management skills."<sup>16</sup> The sense of feeling alterior, of being the other, actually makes it easier to exert as much central authority and power as it takes to rule the system. What happens when the frame of rebellion expands? What happens when players believe virtual protest, facilitated within a simulation produced by an actual corporation, is really protest? What does it mean when "protest" becomes another means of consumption?





Figure 3-5 Is a 2008 protest in meant generating new virtual objects, such as placards, and drumming up PR drama, a “protest,” or more on for Linden?

Ondrejka openly mocks protests in *Second Life* as fads, “Some have become entrepreneurs, opening stores, bars, and strip clubs [...] Fads follow innovation and waves of new ideas have repeatedly swept through the population, from wings to protest marches.” Imbuing even more “reality” to the fad of protest, Linden Lab accedes to the occasional demand. A famous incident was a virtual tax revolt in 2003. The ire was over a monetary charge for each primitive object players created, damned as a “tax on creativity.” In-world rebellion was seen as endearing by Linden Lab. Players didn’t challenge Linden outside the safety glass. While Linden (and “Lindens” as employees and volunteers are called) exists in many forms: a physical

company, an incorporated entity, an online business, a producer of a virtual world; protesters realized themselves in one. Beyond some dire emails and forum posts, they effectively were content creators for Linden, churning out more viral hype and the digital goods: designing, programming, and implementing little placards, bonfires, songs, and smoke, animating avatars to march in sync. If people don't play with the form of protest in the act itself, do they even really protest?

By predetermining what open-endedness means in the virtual, Ondrejka precludes it. World designers say without a wink at Orwell: Your Submission is Your Freedom. Bartle admits this common conceit as he justifies himself. It is all in the player's interest. Play must be protected from reality:

Virtual-world administrators have absolute control over their virtual world vested in the mechanics of that world. While this state of affairs pertains, they can protect the game conceit. If they were denied absolute control, then the game conceit must be protected in some other way, otherwise, the virtual world would just be an extension of the real world.

So only two worlds exist, and one is a marauding fiend. The magic circle is the line of defense. Play is a delicate flower in the garden, in need of protection, even from the trampling feet of the players themselves. The consensus among game designers is that players—for their own protection—mustn't be allowed to play too hard, play with the server code, or physical processors that run the virtual world, for example. Distaste for griefers spills over onto players who don't play as the designers intended. Castronova warns: "Players should abide by the rules or expect extreme sanctions." How can the videogames deliver us to the new lands of fantasy, myth, and saga, if the rules by which we will get there are already written?

## Magic Circle Blends Play and Reality

Castronova, Bartle, and other fantasy-advocates, see even greater threats to the fictional mirror than the antics of some pesky grievers. Raph Koster agrees. Koster isn't concerned about losing the fiction. He isn't even concerned about losing the intrinsic value of play. He is less mired in the freedom rhetoric than in the rhetoric of rights. Koster fears that individuals will lose their legal grasp on reality, as reality encroaches and leaks into our virtual worlds. Koster has authored the "Declaration of Player's Rights" in response to this fear. Extrapolating out from present trends, Koster predicts that the market will eventually annex every aspect of virtual reality as another revenue stream in the digital economy. All variant values of play will be overwritten. A single exchange-value will rule them all. In the guise of convenient play, we will acquiesce and give up our rights of privacy, protection, portability, and autonomy. Recent debacles over user data with Facebook and Google are cast as precursors of an impending implosion of reality into the virtual world. Koster warns:

Someday there won't *be* any admins. Someday it's gonna be your bank records and your grocery shopping and your credit report [...] On the day that happens, I bet we'll all wish we had a few more rights in the face of a very large, distributed server, anarchic, virtual world.

Fantasy advocates like Castronova and Bartle, and reality advocates, like Koster, are not as far apart as they seem. Both secure a stable image of the virtual that is opposed to the real. From both perspectives, the function of the magic circle is to partition and protect. It either secures the virtual as already real (Koster), or shields

the fantasy of the game from reality (Castronova, Bartle). Both are predicated on boundary-work, seek optimality, construct hierarchies of control, wish to deliver on expectations, and favor clean distinctions.



Figure 3-6 Cruising for elastic faces, skin through a phantasmagoric shopping mall in *Second Life*.

We may appreciate Koster's warning, but his double vision is still too defensive and modern. We should not confuse securing rights with securing play from reality, or vice versa. If players predicate themselves on security, they close themselves off from alterity. Play is seeing the other as not the same as oneself, not as a variant pattern of a familiar reality. Play is arriving at an alternate synthesis of world-and-self. Game critics fear what we should be fascinated and encouraged by. They fear crossovers, hybrids, systemic instability, inefficiency, and shared control. Mongrels are threatening to both "reality" and "play," but only insofar that our beliefs about reality are hard and serious, and beliefs about play are soft and inane.

Mutants, leakages, and blended frames of reference are the rule rather than the exception in play. Although, according to how videogame studies treats play this is far from evident. Jesper Juul blends the subject in the very title of his book, *Half-Real*, but collapses it as the title rolls on: *Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. “Real” is reduced to procedural rules, and fiction to elements of storyworlds. The realities and fictions that sustain (or threaten the stability of) our everyday lives and social fortunes are not allowed to burrow their way into the discussion. We are creatures of fiction, as Erving Goffman puts it, everyday life is a performance. Game theorists abide by the “rules of irrelevance” when it comes to our analyses of play. Goffman coined “rules of irrelevance” to describe the social contract of playing games in a group. In order to ensure communal focus in the shared activity players must “disattend,” or actively ignore, elements that might dilute or conflict with that focus. The elements that threaten the shared focus are diverse, including physical discomforts, to emotions arising from events, problems, or joys, from outside the game activity. These must be treated as if they did not exist at all, according to the rules of irrelevance. Game theorists order the very discussion of play to adhere to this rule. We have a purity fetish in game studies. Instead of hermaphrodites, mutants, and lush extravagant weddings, game critics prefer traumas, cracks, and ruptures, to describe contact between reality and play. Combined with the fact that the rigid, binary logic of the magic circle is a piece of theoretical crystal that just begs to be broken, we have ruptures everywhere. A flurry of articles and conference talks has been reporting on all the delicious cracks in the past few years. “Breaking the Magic Circle” was the name of a Finnish conference in 2008. Pervasive games, big games, or alternate reality games are a favorite topic to discover a “broken” circle, for example, to take a random excerpt from a paper: “Pervasive games try to break

this magic circle by incorporating gameplay into everyday life and objects so that a line between the game and the real life is blurred.”

Johan Huizinga is not the only historical figure that advanced a rigid division between play as frivolous and pretend, and life as serious and real. Another major author on play, Roger Caillois, also took the formalist route, starving play off from anything too meaty, ordinary, or real. Some academics have criticized this original error, but their voices have not been heard within the din of videogame studies. In *Play of the World* James S. Hans writes:

Although both Huizinga and Caillois argue that play is important to human culture, they offer their arguments too late; once the cleavage between the “real” world and the world of play takes place, play will always have a subsidiary role, no matter what the rhetoric might suggest. [...] When one begins a book by stating that “play is superfluous” [...] one is only reinforcing its uselessness for a society that considers things in terms of utility. Huizinga’s study is valuable, but his initial premises undermine the play he so dearly wishes to reclaim.

We play with ordinary world all the time. Through play, we loosen and warp the relationship between our world and ourselves. Play heats up foreplay: a droplet of sweat along a fold of skin twists our situational awareness and we react, perhaps surprising ourselves. Erik Erikson frames “sex play” as “random activities preceding the final act, which permit the partners to choose body part, intensity, and tempo (‘what, and with which, and to whom,’ as the limerick has it). Sex play ends when the final act begins, narrowing choice, dictating tempo, and giving rein into ‘nature’.” In play, we let go of the world to discover alternate handles popping up

along the contour of experience. When a plumber jiggles a coupling nut to catch the faint groove of a stripped copper pipe, a playful attitude pleausurably explores the shape of the “possible” in the union of sensitive fingers, brass nut, cool, and dewy pipe. As opposed to following an operational procedure delineated in advance, the plumber puzzles out a way for them all to jibe together as they see fit. A mom plays peek-a-boo with her child, and their world melodically resonates in an improvisational give-and-take, call-and-response feedback loop. Their shared world is undulating in bubbling wastefulness, celebratory excess of its own existence. Play allows us to create situated and malleable frames through which we can break, bend, and realign, the relationships between bodies, technologies, times, and spaces. While we may be inclined to focus exclusively on the breakages and realignments (in our modern quest for optimality, predictability, reproducibility, procedurality, safety, efficiency, and so on), but a playful mind appreciates the shape of the bends themselves.

However, the reverse can be said as well: the “real” world remixes and reorients play. Goffman demonstrates that although people ostensibly play “inside” a storyworld, the larger social world “outside” affects the experience all the time—in short the “rules of irrelevance” are constantly bent and broken in actual practice. Only in the ideal game-state imagined by theorists, do the rules remain taut and intact. As Chris Crawford has noted, a child replays a bedtime story in real-time: “No, the princess kissed the frog last time. I say she squashes it!” These are not just some weird breaks in the magic circle, but are the central energy and tide that gives body to the structure of play. The magic circle is not about keeping reality out. It is about accessing and altering reality in play, and opening up play to the contingencies of reality. Goffman grasps this when he says, “The World, in truth, is a wedding.” And so are games.

## Magic Circle Historically was not about Safe Play

To the degree that we are modern, we have trouble grasping play as frivolous and serious at the same time. Into this cognitive chasm, between serious and frivolous, ourselves, our theories and things, are constantly falling in. Caillois falls in when he writes: “secrecy, mystery, and even travesty are what play exposes, publishes, and somehow *expends*. In a word, play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious.” The cliché of the bleary-eyed videogame addict impervious to the real world captures the cynicism perfectly. Play is then druggish escape stealing away productivity. The magic circle squeezes the life force of the player, expending her mysteries and secrets, vampirically extracting her essence. This is backwards if we look from a nonmodern perspective. Play does not burn up the mysterious. That is the job of the modern regime ruled by scientism, and the postmodern regime ruled by proceduralism. The death of mystery is the result of the progressive view of the world as one big managerial problem to solve, or the industrial process of framing the world as a big resource to exploit. Regrettably, this is how we make and play our games—as if games were inherently about solving problems, getting from a to b, etc., or resource management trainers. The concept of play has atrophied because of the widespread, hegemonic desire and fear (of “progressives,” “conservatives,” academics, the market, and so on) to manage the world and minimize risk, to reduce irruptions of upsetting and unknown dangers. It seems the entire political spectrum (at least in the United States) has colluded to ruin our fun and games from every conceivable angle.



### *Play is Predicated On Risk*



Figure 3-7 The value of a live action role-playing game is not that it occurs in a reality-free zone of pure play, but that it remixes reality and play in a particular way, allowing people to exist in alternate realities and identities.

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, play *requires* risk. Premoderns understand this, and so does the political avant-garde. Play needs the real or else it is not play at all, but lubricated masturbation, self-associative fiddling. Hans summarizes the dynamic well:

From the playful perspective, however, one does not simply place oneself at risk; he places everything at risk, and not in the naive sense that he must consider the consequences of his action on other people as well as himself.

[...] One risks the world precisely by giving oneself up to it [...] Yet we have done our best to eliminate the risk in play, to make it “safe” for society. We almost need to relearn from the beginning that play is always only play if something is really at stake, or if everything is at stake.

We must struggle against the hegemonic conception of the magic circle as purely safe. Huizinga’s problem, now our problem, is that we think in binaries: safe/risk, real/fantasy, play/work, and so on. Huizinga presents World 1: the ordinary social world. He presents World 2: a delicate play world. His model is based on the dichotomy of sacred (imaginary) and profane (real) because he believes in a modern, Western, Enlightenment reality governed by the scientific method. The political avant-garde denies this dichotomy, as do premodern cultures. For Huizinga, the only “real” world is the rational world that science describes. Huizinga assumes play and the sacred are delicate and weak, and that the profane world is rugged and powerful—grounded in the material resources of nature. This is why Huizinga states: “The spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. He reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world. He robs play of its *illusion*.” What about the warped world of the spoilsport? What about robbing reality of its illusion? What about the reality of play?

### *Playing with the “Real”*



Figure 3-8 Huichol Indians at the Canal de Colores in northern Mexico gather in a magic circle to perform a peyote ceremony.

It is a modern conceit to imagine that play is only capable of being “robbed of its illusion” by reality. It is premodern, and avant-garde, to have visionary ability to see the reverse. They understand that reality is just as easily “robbed of its illusion” by play. To understand what this might mean for us today, we can examine what it meant across a string of moments historically. As Latour describes, premodern cultures live in a world of slippages that breed reality with fantasy. It makes for fascinating hybrids of the two, hybrids that are monstrous in that you can never escape from them. Magical thinking is the wormhole between, and the glue that bonds, the two. Considered to be the founder of anthropology, Sir James Frazer,

described two types of magical thinking that can be identified the world over: contagious magic and imitative (or homeopathic) magic. Contagious magic believes that once two things come into contact the bond remains after they are separated: a footprint in the dirt is still connected to the man who stepped there; a relative who dies can still terrorize or aid his living brethren. Imitative magic is even more imaginative than contagious magic. Things don't need to come into physical contact to connect, they need to only appear, move, or function like the other. The wind-rustled grass is also a restless spirit; the Eucharist is both "bread" and the "body" of Christ. Not entirely "fantasy" nor entirely "real," hybrid worlds deform, break apart, and propagate into an unrolling habitus of various play-realities. Like serial hermaphrodites, hybrid worlds have unique and emergent affordances that reality and fantasy don't have when separate. For moderns, it is always someone else that believes in such rubbish, never themselves—but as Latour argues, people who believe that they are the most categorical, logical, and scientific, are always the ones living with the most leviathan hybrids: by repressing their hermaphroditic nature, it only metastasizes within moderns more intensely.

If we wish to accept Huizinga's two worlds: reality and fantasy, then we have to add a third world that combines these two. Naming this third world is troublesome. Various communities treat it differently. For one, this third world is where we can locate the source of the "Real." The Real is a concept of Jacques Lacan developed for psychoanalysis, but used by cultural theorists, most famously, Slavoj Žižek. The Real refers to unknown, alien things that irrupt into human experience. The Real resists representation, and threatens the stability of representation itself. It is whatever cannot be incorporated into our symbolic order of language, cultural logic, or procedures of the computer. How the Real appears to us is relative to the person and her cultural milieu. For example, in contemporary popular culture, the

Real is “represented” as an otherworldly resurgence of the material world against the cultural world: the zombie horde in apocalypse films and games, or the sky-moving bulk of flapping crows in *The Birds*. The Real is how we might experience an influx of grey goo in a videogame. This notion of the Real runs exactly counter to how the real, or “reality,” is proceduralized in technoculture and ordered by language. Reality banishes the Real so it can appear stable, permanent, predictable, and safe. “Reality” is a coping mechanism against the nauseating overflow of being alive in a universe that is almost entirely outside your ability to comprehend it.

According to the theorist of “everyday life,” Michel de Certeau, “media transforms the great silence of things into its opposite. Formerly constituting a secret, the real now talks constantly. News reports, information, statistics, and surveys are everywhere.” The “real” that de Certeau mentions is the opposite of the rupturing Real that arrives when the world “speaks for itself” and is not “spoken for” in a measured way. The fact that we tend to understand the world either as “real” (as a vast, dormant, material resource) or as Real (as a threat and disaster, Mother Nature’s vengeance, etc.) reveals our contemporary pathology. It is this pathology by which we split the Real off entirely from our reality, that Latour, Žižek, de Certeau, each lament. In other cultures and eras, the Real appears according to their own pathologies. For example, for a “devoutly paranoid” Nazi, the subterranean and ever-lurking, Jewish threat was empowered by the Real.

To blend the worlds of reality-and-play, or reality-and-the-Real, or the material-and-spiritual (for the non-atheists), are the moves of premoderns and the avant-garde. In *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky cast artists as prophets, calling forth visions and anti-visions, a move not uncommon in the history of the avant-garde. Even if an artist doesn’t believe in the spiritual or

the Real, does not mean that it is not active in the player. Whatever you call it, the important thing here is that by trying to juggle three worlds, instead of two, will help us break the habit of structuring our understanding of the world in a binary. All three worlds: fantasy, reality, and the Real (or the spiritual), coexist for premoderns and for the political avant-garde. The world is a playground, a dangerous playground, but it always has been dangerous—to imagine otherwise is to be modern. There is no safety in play. There is not a soul-killing, shocked seriousness to reality. Strange, unexplainable, or unmanageable events are *expected* to happen. (I recall a moment in Cambodia when an American died in an outdoor café on a dirt road. He just died right there in his chair. For locals, it was curious and sad, but not startling, that a man was sitting there, dead.) There is a traumatic *cause*, but not a traumatic *effect*.

Although they both mix worlds, the premoderns and the political avant-garde mix worlds in fundamentally different ways. The avant-garde is rejecting modernity from “this side” of modernity and the premoderns are unable to even conceive of “this side” (if they could, they would no longer be premodern, but modern). This is how the avant-garde can (invoking the Real) “playfully rob reality of its illusion,” or, (through the lens of Sherry Turkle) warp our fantasies that imbue with reality.





Figure 3-9 Doctor Faustus draws a magic circle to protect himself from dangerous spirits, not from ordinary reality.

Huizinga wasn't historical or cross-cultural enough in his analysis. The circle was not drawn to protect magical play from a dulling ordinary world. In many cases, it is not the profane or daily world that people are afraid of, but another world, the irrational side of reality, a sacred world. Frazer explains that the danger coming from the sacred world is no less threatening even if academics believe it is fantasy, "The danger, however, is not less real because it is imaginary; imagination acts upon man as really as does gravitation, and may kill him as certainly as a dose of prussic acid." Historically, in Pagan practice, the circle was not drawn to protect a fragile spiritual space, but the contrary; it was drawn to protect a little bubble of ordinary reality. As the middle age woodcut of Doctor Faustus above shows, spirits are conjured *outside of the circle* as participants stand inside it. People were in fear or

awe of the otherworldly things conjured and had to stand behind an invisible shield. This use of the magic circle opposes Huizinga's cynical attitude toward play. It is everyday reality and normal wellbeing that is the fragile weakling in need of nurturing and protection from the crush of spiritual reality—from spiritual “spoilsports” that rob reality of its illusion.

*Doctor Faustus*, a tragicomedy play by Christopher Marlowe published in 1604, casts reality as a patchwork, yanked and torn by faith and science, human hubris and folly. *Faustus* is based on the Faust legend, which had an oral history in the 16th century, which has inspired many works since. The overreaching protagonist, Doctor Faustus, sells his soul for knowledge and power, beginning with the art of necromancy. Faustus is ultimately killed by Mephistophilis, the helpful demon he thought to have mastered, hence the saying, “Faustian bargain.” To quote Faust, standing in the magic circle, after he has just conjured the demon, appearing outside of it, “I charge thee to return and change thy shape, ☉Thou art too ugly to attend on me. ☉Go, and return an old Franciscan friar: ☉That holy shape becomes a devil best.” Just beyond the anti-Catholic satire, the play blends science with spirit in contradictory ways. The unstable hybridity of the magic circle is a synecdoche for the entire play. In one moment, Faustus wants to selfishly “heap up gold,” but in another, selflessly “make men live eternally.”

There is no side to stand by in, no way of thinking or being that is entirely safe and real, nor entirely fake and fantastic. Faust's own understanding vacillates upon the bargain he's made. Sometimes he knows he's damned, and other times, that it's all fantasy. Even when Faust ostensibly believes in a spiritual reality, he uses it to service ordinary and hedonistic pursuits (similar to how we debase the fantastic potential of our videogames to service lackluster power fetishes). As Sylvan Barnet



writes, “the trivial ends to which on the whole Faustus puts his magic—the ‘belly-cheer’ that includes satisfying his palate and his lust reveal Faustus's reduction of spiritual realities to physical states.” Barnett continues, “The danger in reading the play is that we will see only either the heroic humanist or the fool; we may have difficulty in understanding that Faustus can be both.” The axis of the confusion is the fact that Faust vacillates upon the precise function of the magic circle. Is it for engaging in playful and lustful fantasy, or is it for science to improve the lot of man? Faust’s symbolic downfall stems from his inability to understand that the magic circle can be used for both, that it is always both, that high science is itself a play for power, that reality is an unstable game. An opera entitled *Doctor Atomic* by John Adams about Robert Oppenheimer and the invention of the atomic bomb, transports Doctor Faustus to the 20th century. The opera opens with the chorus, “Matter can be neither created nor destroyed but only altered in form. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed but only altered in form.” Lessons learned in quantum science are well suited to reintegrate risk into our worlds of play.

### *Magical Technology*

The life adventures of the magic circle in history runs the gamut from epic to quotidian. The magic circle is not limited to storied use by Faustian man-god lion-tamers eaten up by the weird and extraordinary. The circle can shrink down to a simple magical technology used to address ordinary problems. It has been used to improve luck in gambling or warfare, manage health, or aid in marital problems. Frazer provides a quotidian example:

To bring back a runaway slave an Arab will trace a magic circle on the ground, stick a nail in the middle of it, and attach a beetle by a thread to the

nail, taking care that the sex of the beetle is that of the fugitive. As the beetle crawls round and round, it will coil the thread about the nail, thus shortening its tether and drawing nearer to the centre of at every circuit. So by virtue of homeopathic magic the runaway slave will be drawn back to his master.

The magic circle is handled differently here than in it is in Faust's treatment. It's more like a handy gizmo, a simple spiritual technology. Play is an integrated facet of everyday life, mildly warping the shape of ordinary reality. The subtly with which reality and play jibe, is only possible because the "spiritual" world and "everyday" world were not split to begin with.

The magic circle of history and of the avant-garde is heretical to the modern mind, because it treats the contradiction of humans as magical thinkers and rational thinkers, as a bug to fix, not a feature to exploit and play with. For the modern fixers, it is useful to imagine people who actually believe in a spiritual world to be in much less of awe of it than rational folks who can only fantasize it in histrionic ways. For fervent atheists, faith is a planetary scourge. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens can, without irony, castigate religion with the religious zeal of colonial Salem. Paul Feyerabend argues in his anarchistic theory of knowledge, that a puritanical persecution of religion, through its unilateral thinking, perpetuates the same oppression it opposes. Because they do not allow for any sources for genuine alterity beyond science, moderns quarantine play from reality, reducing it into an infantile pursuit of the safest pleasure. Which is reversed: reality is quarantined from play, until the world is instrumentalized into one big, hard problem to manage.

## The American Automobile

**Your car makes any map  
a Magic Circle**



1. Be king of the hill—any hill. Around Atlanta, it might be Kennesaw or Fort Mountain. In the Magic Circle around you, the same rewarding views and refreshing air await you—any day you head for the hills by car.

Something old, something new . . . discover an endless variety of both in this Old South Magic Circle. A Magic Circle just as fascinating surrounds you. But don't settle for our say-so. Set out by car and see.



This series of advertisements is published by Ethyl Corporation, New York 17, N. Y. to help you get more enjoyment out of your car. Ethyl Corporation manufactures antiknock compounds, used by oil companies everywhere to improve their gasolines and your driving pleasure.




2. Treasure hunt, '59 style. You'll find hundreds of unexpected, off-the-beaten-path discoveries along the fine roads around you. Example: you can actually pan gold at Dahlonega, site of the first big U. S. find.



3. Drive back into the past. Early Americans seem mighty close at history-rich spots like the Etowah Indian mound excavations. And the easiest, most leisurely way to look them over is by car.



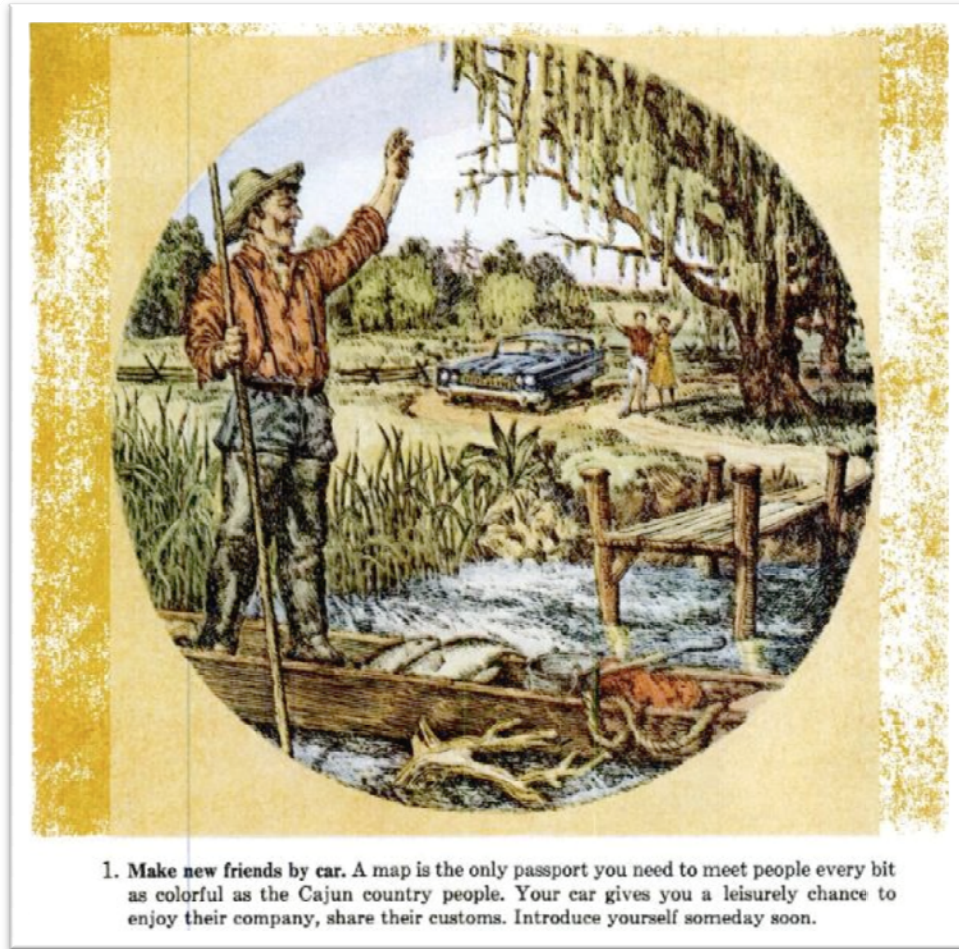
4. Open up a storybook world. Your car is the key. Your Magic Circle has the match for Joel Chandler Harris' "Wren's Nest," where Brer Rabbit still lives on. Treat your family to a tour soon.



5. Map out your Magic Circle. Your car is the best investment in fun you ever made. Don't miss out on its endless happy returns. Start driving—start really living—next chance you get.

Figure 3-10 In the 1950s, your surrounding geographic area (accessible by car) could be transformed into an adventure space if you "Map out your Magic Circle."

The technological decadence and hubris of 1950s America was fueled by the allied victory and economic aftermath of the Second World War. Industrial optimism wedded with nationalism, along with the rise of product ownership and consumerism, had fascinating effects on the popular concept of the magic circle, of how reality and play could mate and mix. The above ad by the Ethyl Corporation appeared in *Life* magazine in 1959. The product is Ethyl Antiknock Gasoline (leaded gasoline that reduced engine knocking) and the ad is to encourage playful road trips, in this case to the Atlanta, Georgia area. The tagline is: "Your car makes any map into a Magic Circle." The tagline appeared throughout the ad campaign running throughout the 1950s. It featured dozens of American locales, from the Louisiana Bayou, to the San Francisco Bay, and Hudson Valley. The bottom tagline: "Your car is the best investment in fun you ever made." accompanied an instruction to take out a map and a pencil and draw a circle around where you already were, or where you wanted to go, and start exploring.



1. Make new friends by car. A map is the only passport you need to meet people every bit as colorful as the Cajun country people. Your car gives you a leisurely chance to enjoy their company, share their customs. Introduce yourself someday soon.

Figure 3-11 In drawing the magic circle the everyday world becomes an expansive Disneyland stock full of colorful characters, such as the real life “Cajun country people.”

The ad detail above reads, “**Make new friends by car.** A map is the only passport you need to meet people every bit as colorful as the Cajun country people. Your car gives you a leisurely chance to enjoy their company, share their customs. Introduce yourself someday soon.” The ad copy (the “magic circle” theme was established in the early 50s) reframes America into a big sprawling Disneyland several years before the park even came into existence (in 1955). The world becomes a playground conveniently staffed with strange peoples to entertain us with their fascinating local cultures, cuisines, and sceneries. According to Ethyl Corporation, a map, any map, could magically become the launching point into a different



“storybook world.” Like players of an alternate reality game, the readership didn’t apparently have much cognitive dissonance in reality mixing with fantasy in these magazine spreads. The ad campaign represents the epistemological shift people were experiencing in that era. As Žižek and Baudrillard have argued, in the rise of “car culture,” the windows of the automobile transformed the world outside into a movie that played out in front of us, and, as it feels, for us. Culture becomes nature: urban cities are recast as wild safaris to explore and discover. Nature becomes culture: the rural is recast as a distant suburbia, as an extension or outgrowth of the city. The country is reincorporated into city life through the expansive mobile power of your vehicle.

### *Time, Space, and Swimsuit Models*



Figure 3-12 *Magic Circle* magazine absorbed the Earth and beyond, as well as the past, present, and future, in a playful celebration of technoculture.

Above are some covers of a magazine actually called *Magic Circle* (no relation to the Ethyl Corporation), which ran from the 1941 to the 1973. The magazine had an even broader net of a magic circle than the Ethyl ad campaign. The breadth of the magazine’s geographical space reached beyond America’s shores to embrace the

globe and beyond. The category of technologies which transformed that space, diversified as well. For transport it no longer constrained itself to the consumer automobile, but hopped onto racecars, motor homes, every sort of recreational vehicle, including snow mobiles and desert dune buggies, to airplanes and rocket ships. Because it felt so comfortable in the future-present (the beginning of postmodern) it didn't blink to reexamine quaint technologies, like the cattle-drawn wagon, pictured above. The pool of industries that captured the imagination, eclectically mixed histories and futures, local tourism and space exploration, theme parks and agriculture, military and entertainment. Interesting to note, is that in spite of the massive expansion of its domain, the magazine's kernel is nearly identical to that of the Ethyl ad campaign. The entity behind *Magic Circle* magazine was Perfect Circle Corporation, mass producer of piston rings, bought by the Dana Corporation in 1963.



Figure 3-13 New military gadgets, Disneyworld, swimsuit models, far-flung car industries in Venezuela, all commiserate freely in an issue of *Magic Circle* (June, 1956).

In the inside cover of the June 1956 issue, pictured above, it is printed, "Published in the interests of Perfect Circle distributors, dealers, garages, repair shops and super service stations all over the world, by Perfect Circle Corporation."



Again, the automobile industry catalyzes transformation and expansion of the magic circle of play in the mind of the American public. Latour would appreciate the captivating juxtaposition of the table of contents. A review of the first and newly build Disneyland (picturing a rocket ship from the Tomorrowland of 1986) lives to the left of the booming car industry of Venezuela, itself sandwiched between the latest night-vision technology deployed by the U.S. military, and a Mercedes Benz transport truck capable of 105 mph when fully loaded. Of course, a woman in a swimsuit splashes into view, because why not have every piston firing in the red-blooded male psyche as he grips the figuratively spinning wheel of the American automobile, exploding his body into space, the future, and beyond.

Does popular culture of 1956, in its brutal, structural oppression of women and minorities, have a more sophisticated grasp of the magic circle than videogame studies in 2010? No, but the former is motivated by a budding postmodern episteme. Both are technocentric and decadent, yet the imagination of the 1950s was (ironically) not as split along the modern, cynical divide determining play as virginal, frivolous, and the everyday world as serious and draining. The postmodern “magic circle” of the 20th century, through the dynamic catalyst of the American automobile, rhetorically tarmaced the entire world into a Disneyland, just as Walt Disney was tarmacing his park. And well before that, James Frazer’s “magic circle” of the 19th century was even more richly mixed in terms of hybridity. The Arab drew a circle in dirt, put a stick in the center with a tethered beetle attached winding back the runaway slave as it wound around. The magic circle becomes instrumental technology to accomplish an ordinary task. Inside it, reality is something to pinch, pull, and play with, like sticks and strings. Our 17th century Faust bargained with the devil, learning science via supernatural means, was it to

save mankind, or sate his gut? History impugns the modern vision of play and reality: we drain them both of life, when we insist on a clinical separation of the two.

What of postmodernism? What of Derrida, Baudrillard, or even Kant, who deny human access to objective “reality”? What of those who dismantle reality and construct in its place endless circularity, a spherical looking-glass, a sea of signs? Play in a postmodern magic circle is even safer than it is for moderns, because its great nemesis, reality, has finally been slain. Only the faceless Real, a psychotic echo is left to haunt the bubble of culture. No “real” thing can threaten the hegemony of play for postmoderns. So it is left to gnaw at itself, in impotent and psychotic irony. The postmodern mind is even more obsessed with purity—albeit a negative purity of total denial—than the modern mind. Postmoderns need the political avant-garde even more than moderns do. The radical political avant-garde rejects the idea that irony is the last hope. The political avant-garde *denies* the postmodern denial of reality, for example, by openly engaging and playing with the Real as an equal—not just as an echo. Through the magic circle, the political avant-garde dissolves the modern divide between fantasy and reality, art and politics.

## Magic Circle in Art History

### *Black Panthers*



Figure 3-14 Through creative uses of “street theater,” the original Black Panthers used symbolic violence (violence to the symbolic order itself) to reconfigure the cultural meaning of “blacks” in a society that is structurally racist.

I will use a rather unusual example of a historical political avant-garde to correlate the political avant-garde of games: the original Black Panther Party (not to be confused with the black supremacist group, the New Black Panther Party). Dada and Duchamp are the common examples used to introduce and correlate a political avant-garde of games. I introduce the Black Panthers because they reveal how the avant-garde blends politics and art in the magic circle in a fairly obvious way. The Black Panthers are, arguably, one of the most important avant-gardes in American history, a quintessentially “American avant-garde.” They have contributed far more

culturally than they have been given credit. The paradoxical inversions of power, horrendous violence and misogyny, make them especially awkward to critically outlay, but these also make them emblematic of the imbroglios that occur in the throes of radical avant-garde politics. When venturing into territories in which we are blind, as we strive to open the structures of cultural power, it is extraordinarily difficult to move, act, and think. So much can get twisted and go wrong.

In 1968, the nightmare-fantasy of suburban whites flickered on television sets across America: Black Panthers marched in mechanized fashion into the California State Capitol building with shotguns. It was an influx of the Real for a popular culture unaware, or in denial, of its structural racism. This event is usually thought of as a protest first, and theatrics second. This reverses a crucial turn of power. The forcework of the event lies in its blending of political theater. Similar to how *Toywar* levied the medium videogames to illuminate the procedurally militaristic nature of advanced capitalism; the Black Panthers used the medium of theater against the structural discrimination and racism permeating American society. Ed Bullins, a young playwright who once served as the Panthers' "minister of culture" wished to move the dramatic ideas of black power "out into the community as 'street theater'." Eldridge Cleaver founded the Black House, a community center and theater in San Francisco, before he became "minister of information" of the party. The Panthers understood how art could be used politically to reveal public perceptions and transform cultural assumptions. In *The Art of Protest* T.V. Reed argues that the original Black Panthers are actually best understood as a radical political avant-garde, and uses this perspective to explain how this was their greatest "strength" and their greatest "weakness":

Much of the public activity of the Black Panthers was built around highly dramatic, stylized confrontations, often involving guns and the police. These are among the main actions that earned them notoriety. This theatricality was in many ways the most important cultural contribution of the Panthers, but it was also their greatest political limitation.

Consider how the theatrics of the Black Panthers was formally embodied: highly structured and militaristic marches, stern, yet robotic, facial expressions, and bombastic speeches. What do these images symbolize? What patterns do they break? What kinds of images do these images unwork? The Panthers waged symbolic warfare that disturbed and undermined the racist stigma of blacks as “lazy,” “stupid,” and “disorganized.” An even more sinister stigma was to be liquidated as well. An oppressive and racist burden upon “blacks” was placed there by well-meaning, paternalistic, white progressives. When blacks are group-cast as perpetual “victims,” they are symbolically capped as (to exaggerate the point) infantile, helpless pawns for governments to manipulate, manage, and parent. The Black Panthers targeted the symbolic order itself to disturb such notions from the national commonsense. Through symbolic violence, the Panthers asserted their power as active, self-determining subjects that *made history*, rather than inert objects *to which history merely happens*. The “violence” of the Black Panthers was symbolic before it was physical. As Reed points out, to lure the Panthers across this line from symbolic to literal violence, was one of the strategic purposes of COINTELPRO, an FBI program that infiltrated the group. Undercover agents caused fractious disputes from within, and helping agitate the group into literal violence. The government apparently understood the Black Panthers as “avant-garde” long before art critics did. Of course, none of this compensates for the terrible misogyny and murders perpetrated by the Panthers, but hopefully. It should make clear what we can learn

from the forcework of their political theater. The fact that the historical Black Panthers are so problematic to symbolically situate, even after all this time, captures the importance of understanding their cultural contribution.

As the Panthers demonstrate, the strategy of the political avant-garde is not to “raise awareness” about specific political, economic, or social issues. That is how technoculture wishes to frame them, because it inoculates their transformative force into “expression” — the bankrupt claim of a politically dead avant-garde. They are not politicians working within the order, but agents struggling through the inky blackness outside of the order, trying to reform the order from its own cultural blind spots. They do not offer statements upon which we are to weigh and reflect up all the pros and cons—they act in ways that affect perception itself. The aim is to change the means by which we culturally structure, represent, communicate, and interpret meanings about people, media, truth, value, and so on. By blending social politics with an avant-garde super-aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic, if you wish), the Panthers altered perceptions of what blacks were capable of, and essentially what blacks were and represented. The Black Panthers were not “expressing” a political message but manifesting, enacting, and directing, a force that would reconfigure cultural assumptions on a deeper level. They were standing up as a force to be reckoned with, as initiative-taking subjects who asserted their need to exist and to self-direct their fate. It was more about opening up and establishing a cultural presence (from which meaning is later derived) rather than just conveying meaning from the outset. Author of the *Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière, provides some perspective:

political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art

would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of a negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.

This is why it is impossible to fully appreciate the significance of an avant-garde when it happens. It is not about making meaning but reconfiguring how meaning is made within culture. It is a battle over the placement of the lines of communication and language rather than what is already being transmitted through them. As Hal Foster puts it, a political “avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic—a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it.” The symbolic order is the structure of our social reality that is constituted by the rules of language and culture. The radical political avant-garde employs violence against the rules of representation, so we may see otherwise, see beyond and between the rules, and perhaps rewrite them. It reintroduces all the banished stuff that cultural “commonsense” cannot process, whether it is gay sexuality, player freedom to recode games at runtime, or the need for blacks to assert themselves as human beings who demand equality rather than ask government elites to give it to them. There is vast negative space in the symbolic order, innumerable *things* that the logic of popular culture can’t articulate, understand, or even see. Because the avant-garde plays in this negative space, their actions appear deeply threatening because they threaten the logical order itself. Whether it is Dada of 1916, Panthers of the 1960s, or grievers today, in confronting them, we face the “the very limit of language.” We are

confronted by that which “shapes our sense of reality, even though it is excluded from it.” Over time the actions of the avant-garde become intelligible, history begins to make sense of it, forming new language around the events. Yesterday’s ruptures become today’s touchstones. If we look a little further back than 1960, perhaps we can get a better handle on some touchstones of the political avant-garde through the cultural distance.

### *Futurism: Fascist Griefers of 1909*

Each political avant-garde emerges from its own cultural moment, responding to it in ways particular to the people involved. Today, it engages the category of technocultural entertainment because that is where our aesthetic routines of control, violence, and desire, are most culturally securing, hegemonic, and self-assuring of what’s real. Historically, it turned upon the category of art because that was where the aesthetic rituals, and symbolic reserves, seemed culturally dominant (in its elitist, rather than popular, cache), and restrictive. Whether its axis is art, entertainment, or some future category of media, the avant-garde always recalls a premodern magic circle of mixture, hermaphrodites, and influx of the Real. In the alchemy of the magic circle, it harnesses the latent currents of representation to reveal its contingent nature, and to put the routines of media experiences back into play.





Figure 3-15 Futurist noise poetry imitates the machine in its twin forces of destruction and reconstruction.

Two of the most important political avant-garde movements, Futurism and Dada, lived in the era of World War I (1914-1918). Dada emerged, and had its heyday, during the war itself. Futurism arose before it and continued long after. Filippo Marinetti founded the movement in Italy with his 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*. Marinetti expressed a fear in Italy that the country was mired in past tradition, was not embracing modernity to its own peril. To remedy this, Marinetti wanted his countrymen to vigorously “play with life.” Restated in the negative, “We want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong Futurists.” A hyper-masculine movement, Italian Futurism loathed old traditions of art and culture, even future “traditions” yet to be invented. Only perennial violence could sustain Italy. No more

“cult of the past”: museums were to be burned down perennially, frail artists mobbed and beaten by younger ones.

The Futurist struggle was predicated upon the power of science and the machine to transform the world into a field to play out our desires and to dominate, whether it is to dominate nature, or other nations through fascism. Through the machine, Italians would conquer inertia through vehicular speed, smash distance with the locomotive train, and defy gravity via the airplane and the erection of steel skyscrapers. By blending with the machine man becomes God, while other peoples and nations become mealy fodder to crush beneath tanks, bombers, and augmented soldiers. Art is redefined through this passionate vision of the machine. Drawings are ripped apart and reassembled as if by mad, autonomous robots. Noise poetry erupts in cafes emulating the blasts, clicks, and rumbling of airplanes, guns, and factories. A trope that science fiction has run with is Marinetti’s “dreamt-of metallization of the human body.” All aspects of life are assaulted with the Futurist vision of art. Nowhere was safe, not the bathroom, sky, art museum, or human body. Not the kitchen: “No more spaghetti!” Marinetti wrote as if the limp noodles sapped Italian vigor as if they were disgusting piles of flaccid phalluses. Scientific equipment would dominate the newly electroplated, chrome kitchen: ozonizers would pump the smell of ozone into sandwiches, ultraviolet lights would “activate dormant properties” of vegetables, autoclaves would cook food; colloidal mills would pulp any “eating material,” sculpting meat into fantastic shapes.

*Dada: Ambivalent Grievers of 1917*



Figure 3-16 WWI photographs of trench warfare, an all-terrain tank, and mustard gas.

Although Futurism existed in Russia, England and Eastern Europe, it was mostly famous for its Italian group. In contrast, Dada appeared in many European cultural centers: Zürich, Berlin, Paris, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, such as New York and Tokyo. Similar to the Futurists, Dadaists were responding to the culmination of the Industrial Revolution by incorporating into art the functions of the machine in both its destructive capacity and its productive potency. Also in play was the cultural mythology growing around the machine at the time, especially the mad and mechanized visions of the Futurists. These visions blended with the alien reality of WWI of millions of dead bodies, trench warfare, mustard gas, and

moonlike landscapes of destruction—all captured and transmitted by the new media of photography, radio, and film.



Figure 3-17 *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919-1920) by Hannah Höch mimics the destruction of the WWI in its cutup of traditional aesthetics—but it also creates a new aesthetic as mechanized violence is channeled into the practice of cut-and-paste collage.

The foundational belief of modernity that had been growing in the West for centuries: faith in progress through science and technology, had taken a direct hit. It was the modern fruits of the Enlightenment: advances in industrial engineering, manufacturing, communications, and transportation that had made it all possible. For disillusioned intellectuals, not only were technologists and politicians to blame,



but artists, philosophers, and poets. Beauty and aesthetics had failed. “Art for art’s sake” had failed. Richard Huelsenbeck, a German Dadaist, remembers: “We had found in the war that Goethe and Schiller and Beauty added up to killing and bloodshed and murder. It was a terrific shock to us.”<sup>17</sup>

Dada artists were in many cases responding to their own national turmoil. For example, Berlin artists reacted to the humiliating defeat of Germany in the war and the ensuing chaos.<sup>18</sup> The diversity of impulses resulted in a diverse range in the Dada of Switzerland, Germany, Paris, the United States, and the Netherlands. Hans Richter recalls that, “[t]he peculiarly claustrophobic and tense atmosphere of neutral Switzerland in the middle of the great war supplied an appropriate background” and was vital in unifying a group of characters with different origins and attitudes.<sup>19</sup> These artists found it hard to make art relevant under these conditions. Hans Arp illustrates how they worked their cultural moment into an artistic praxis:

While the guns rumbled in the distance, we sang, painted, made collages and wrote poems with all our might. We were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell.<sup>20</sup>

Dadaists collapsed categories, allowing their feelings and logic, their art and politics, to affect and influence the other. It is difficult for us to imagine a situation where upon hearing rumbling of a nearby war we would be spurred to make art “with all our might.” This pressure cooker took cultural and technical ingredients and condensed them together, creating new synthetic forms in art, new ways of combining mediums, techniques, and aesthetic categories. Formal distinctions between mediums collapsed:

As the boundaries between the arts became indistinct, painters turned to poetry and poets to painting. The destruction of the boundaries was reflected everywhere. The safety valve was off. However unsafe and unknown the territory into which we now sailed, leapt, drove or tumbled, we were all sure where our path lay... And the paths led in all directions.<sup>21</sup>

Theatricality was a favorite medium to mix in with other mediums, as it was so liquid yet caustic. Poetry, music, painting, even political speeches, and so on, blended with theatricality in surprising ways. The most emblematic works of Dadaists were their performance events in which theater reveled in its own *theatricality*, where staged spectacles collapsed under their own dramatic weight.

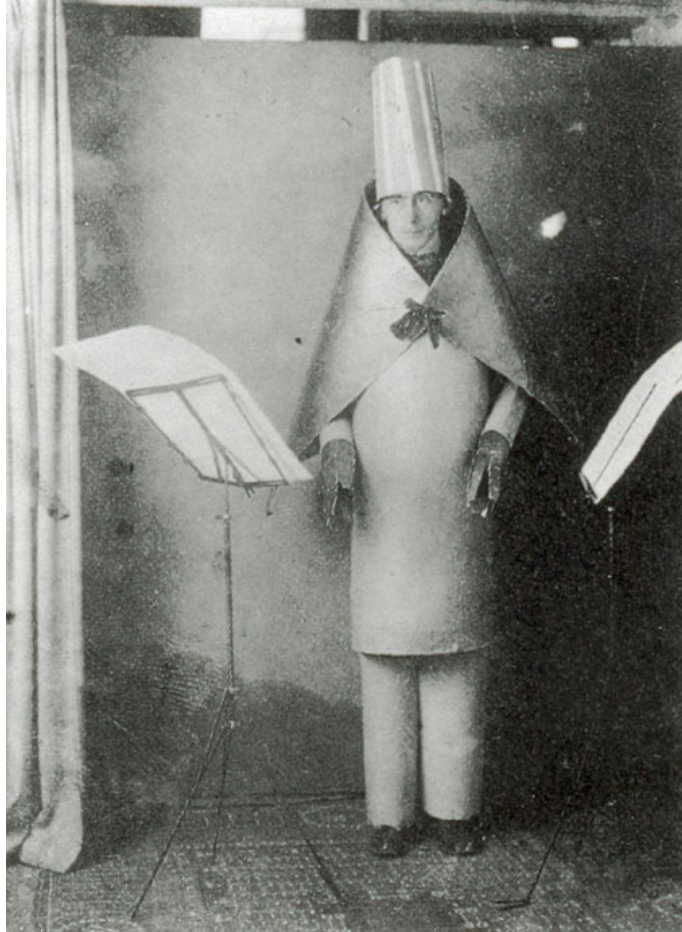


Figure 3-18 Hugo Ball dressed up like a lobster chef reciting his poem, *Karawane*, at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916.

Dada reinvented theater, breaking (and then remixing) conventions like the fourth wall, and the dramatic suspension of disbelief. Hans Richter traces the twists and reversals that comprised one particular Dada event:

Eggeling appeared first... and delivered a very serious speech about elementary *Gestaltung* and abstract art. This only disturbed the audience insofar as they wanted to be disturbed but weren't...Some poems by Huelsenbeck and Kandinsky, recited by Käthe Wulff, were greeted with laughter and catcalls... [Then Dr. Sterner a] tall, elegant figure first carried a

headless tailor's dummy on to the stage, then went back to fetch a bouquet of artificial flowers, gave them to the dummy to smell where its head would have been, and laid them at its feet. Finally he brought a chair, and sat astride it in the middle of the platform with his back to the audience. After these elaborate preparations, he began to read from his anarchist credo... At Last! This is what the audience had been waiting for. The tension in the hall became unbearable. At first it was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Then the catcalls began, scornful at first, then furious. "Rat bastard, you've got nerve!" until the noise almost entirely drowned Serner's voice, which could be heard, during a momentary lull, saying the words "Napoleon was a big strong oaf after all". That really did it. What Napoleon had to do with it, I don't know. He wasn't even Swiss. But the young men...leapt on to the stage, brandishing pieces of the balustrade.<sup>22</sup>

The audience is invited to transgress the categories of artist and audience, to ignore the boundaries of seating and stage. The audience is prodded and teased to effectively *become* Dada themselves.<sup>23</sup> Dadaists could not have shocked audiences unless they knew what buttons to press. They required a keen understanding of 19th century notions of beauty and art in order to reconfigure those traditions so effectively. They knew how to build theatrical tension in order to puncture that tension with invective and provoke bourgeois audiences into Dada-like performances of their own as they retaliated.

### ***Beyond Binaries: of Art/Life and Play/Reality***

The modern mythical divide between play and reality is mirrored in the historical mythical divide between art and life. The avant-garde doesn't mix pure



states together, but rather, demonstrates how they are already mixed, and cannot be unmixed. Dada disagreed with the bourgeois idea that art was a unique cultural category, separate from everyday life. Art had acquired special cultural status in the Romanticism of the 19th century, as artists and cultural elites tried to put art on par with science and philosophy, ultimately making it a secular surrogate for religion. Tristan Tzara wanted to drain the uniqueness of art as a category, asserting that Dada “does not mean anything.”<sup>24</sup> Dada hoped that if art could shock us sufficiently, almost like a chemical catalyst, a new social life could rise from the chaos.



Figure 3-19 *The Matrix* is a contemporary interpretation of Plato’s Cave, in how it advances binary thinking about art vs. life, or virtual vs. real.

The impediments to pinpointing what “art becoming life” means should not be surprising. Dada’s motto purposely resists dogmatic readings and applications,

provoking continual shifts in interpretation. Since the 1960s, the question has been tackled by hundreds of cultural actors. The new age movement has formulated many answers, often crossing paths with the early virtual reality movement. Both promised the marriage of art and life: the former by jacking us into “nature” (or, as in Carlos Castaneda’s “lines of the world,” and so on), and the latter by jacking us into technology in cyberpunk fiction.<sup>25</sup> Jaron Lanier coined the term “virtual reality” and described its potential in 1988 in the *Whole Earth Review*: “I do think that there will be a new emergent social consciousness that can only exist through the medium of Virtual Reality. Virtual Reality is the first medium that’s large enough not to limit human nature. It’s the first medium that’s broad enough to express us as natural beings.”<sup>26</sup>

In 1974 Peter Bürger articulated the dichotomy of art versus life with regard to Dada in, *A Theory of the Avant-garde*. From Dada (and notably, not Futurism), Bürger extrapolated a universal theory of the *political* avant-garde, just as Clement Greenberg had done for the *formal* avant-garde in 1939 with Modern painters. Greenberg advocated “art for art’s sake” in which the formal avant-garde could, theoretically, advance culture for everyone but realistically only aided niche audiences of educated elites who have the training, time, and resources to appreciate work hard at its appreciation. Bürger’s avant-garde was nearly the negative image of Greenberg’s. Bürger argued that the avant-garde is defined by its reach and affect in the general public. If only special audiences confront or appreciate it, then it is a failure.

Peter Bürger examined the question of art-as-life praxis in detail. He described the paradox in this way: when “life is aesthetic and art is practical, art’s purpose can no longer be discovered.”<sup>27</sup> This modern dichotomy is painfully

familiar. It is the same attitude that Huizinga set into stone when he split play off from everyday life. It is a paradigm that relies on always placing the answer elsewhere, the thing we need is always out of reach. Another major art historian, Hal Foster, has responded that this is a false dichotomy:

what is art and what is life here? Already the opposition tends to cede art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach. In this very formulation, then, the avant-garde project is predestined to failure, with the sole exception of movements set in the midst of revolutions.<sup>28</sup>

Using a simple, contemporary example we might build on Foster's critique and illustrate how Bürger was wrong about the political avant-garde. Art's "purpose" can be discovered, surprisingly, in real-time. Anonymous culture affords mobs to be exuberant and celebratory of life in a way that weakens the centralized power of corrupt governments. Belarus is ruled by an oppressive regime and in May 2006, a peaceful flash mob gathered in a public park to eat and share ice cream.<sup>29</sup> Police were instructed to arrest people holding ice cream, in a humorously bungled attempt to quarantine the contagion. The spontaneity and bottom-up, self-determination of the flash mob apparently threatened the government's authority and administrative power. An alternate reality was suddenly visible, and democracy seemed imaginable, if only for a few minutes. It was a tiny velvet revolution. In its overreaction the government undermined its own power, which of course, is a lot cheaper and easier to maintain the more tacit it is. The flash mob had lured the regime into exposing its lack of mass support, its paranoia towards its own people.

In her research on art and social rituals, Ellen Dissanayake, demonstrates the blended nature of each, as does Arnold Hauser in his voluminous, *Social History of*

*Art.* As we do with art, with play we create situated and blended frames through which we can test our relationship with our bodies, with each other, and with our technologies. Of course, philosophers and critics from Plato to Schiller have touched upon the relationship of art and play over the millennia. For example Herbert Spencer, argued in the 19th century that play and art are alike in that their purpose is always dependent upon and proximate to the situation from which they arise. Hans describes the unique affordance of play as an alternate to dichotomies:

In a world where values seem to have disappeared, the playful provides a perspective on how we can make choices and offers a view of the ethical that is neither relativistic nor objective and static. It offers an alternative to the dichotomies that have preoccupied us for so long and suggests a new direction for our thought. The ethical aspect of play shows that, far from being a peripheral activity, play is the most essential category of human experience.<sup>30</sup>

Hans's argument here is analogous to the art historian Hal Foster's critique of Bürger. Foster argued that in setting up a rigid division between art and life Bürger guaranteed that the political avant-garde would fail to define a new kind of art as life praxis. Hans argues that Caillois and Huizinga insist on an unbridgeable gap between play and "real" life. For Hans, games and play have always been a part of human life: there is no gap to bridge. This argument places the political avant-garde of videogames in a vital cultural position. The avant-garde attempts to accomplish what Hans sets as a major goal, accepting real danger and risk as it conjures and plays within the historical magic circle.

## Magic Circle in Videogames

### *Griefers Recall the Historical Magic Circle*

The practice of the contemporary political avant-garde no longer operates on 19th century rules of conventional aesthetics, genteel museums, and art histories. They exercise technocultural knowledge instead. Digital networks, rather than prosceniums, are their material. Player routines in virtual worlds, rather than the routines of traditional, melodramatic theater, are the conventions they rework. They expose and recode how virtual worlds are constructed and managed, how networked commerce regulates the flow of digital life. For millions of players and participants, virtual worlds are separate realities where social rules must apply, or, they are stable fantasies to be protected. Playing with the balance and boundaries of these worlds, the radical political avant-garde of videogames often takes the guise of griefers.

The popular definition of “griefer” is simple: it’s a person who plays games to cause people grief. Predatorial griefers use exploits to gain unfair advantage and win games. Predatorial griefing is not politically avant-garde, but another kind of griefing is, however. Avant-garde griefing plays with implicit and explicit goals of the game. It’s not about winning, but about publically playing hard with the medium technically, socially, and sensually. Where most players are happy to exist in first-order play, to abide by the walls of the sandbox, avant-garde griefers exist in second-order play, trying to expose and rework the walls of the sandbox itself. Avant-garde griefers are wastefully lush, celebrating the medium of videogames even as it falls apart around them.<sup>31</sup>

Bartle claims that griefers are as they are due to lack of skill. In the spirit of Jean Piaget, Bartle claims that people *progress* through a grieving phase in the teleology of personal development. In our universal quest to grow into responsible players, people grief each other as they learn the rules in an organic process of trial, error, and experimentation. Griefing is merely an antithesis to be learned from and integrated into the order. For Bartle, grieving is perfectly natural, normally occurring when players first begin to play in a virtual world. Before players can master the procedural rules and learn to care about the social contract, they grief, similar to how children probe the boundaries set forth by adults:

The classic, *main sequence* is to start as a *griever* (implicit socializer) who tries to find the limits of what is socially possible in the virtual world by attempting to do whatever they can to their fellow players. Having ascertained what is normatively allowed and what isn't, the player becomes a *scientist* (explicit explorer), performing experiments and learning from the results. They string together the primitive actions they have discovered so far and form meaningful sequences that enable them to perform complicated tasks. Armed with enough of these, they advance to become a *planner* (explicit achiever). This takes up the bulk of their time and is where they actually play the game. Eventually, they proceed to become *friends* (implicit socializers), a state born from the camaraderie of people who have come to trust one another over time while under pressure.<sup>32</sup>

The modern fixation on the assimilation of difference shines through in Bartle's teleology of the upright player. Griefing, in Bartle's view, is reduced into a phase in the long process of assimilation. He presents, in the microcosm, the macrocosm of assimilating into the procedures of technoculture itself. Bartle's ideal of

development-as-assimilation is not universal. Many thousands of people are avant-garde griefers, and it is not because they *don't* understand the social and technical rules. It is because they know them all too well. Avant-garde play is not just a pubescent outburst in a great quest to achieve integration in a virtual society. Avant-garde play is a unique mode of being with videogames that is available to any of us at any time. What makes avant-garde play so odd (and which makes the use of the term "griefing" quite misleading), is all this occurs in spite of the fact griefing is supposed to upset people. It is, ironically, the openness to the alien other, to accident, to loss of control, to being in alterity, in gamespace that the griefers demonstrate and realize—all in spite of the fact that they also enjoy upsetting people. Griefers are an accidental political avant-garde. By alienating us from the routines of gamespace, they reveal the Other latent within it.





Figure 3-20 Self-replicating “grey goo” in *Second Life* reveals the malleable nature of virtual worlds usually left dormant, unexpressed, and even oppressed.

As Bartle advises, most players are content to play within the rules of the virtual rather than recode game structures in radical ways. Grievers manipulate the code that stabilizes and affords ordinary transactions of digital culture that are social and economic. We tend to treat the virtual as either 1) a fantasy or 2) an extension of reality. The radical political avant-garde blurs the virtual as both: a malleable material to play with that is real and fantastic at the same time. For grievers, the freaky libertarian shopping mall nature of *Second Life* is itself a flexible thing to be played with rather than played in:

The Albion Park section of *Second Life* is generally a quiet place, a haven of whispering fir trees and babbling brooks set aside for those who “need to be



alone to think, or want to chat privately.” But shortly after 5 pm Eastern time on November 16, an avatar appeared in the 3-D graphical skies about this online sanctuary and proceeded to unleash a mass of undiluted digital jackassery. The avatar, whom witnesses would describe as an African American male clad head to toe in gleaming red battle armor, detonated a device that instantly filled the air with 30-foot-wide tumbling blue cubes and gaping cartoon mouths. For several minutes the freakish objects rained down, immobilizing nearby players with code that forced them to either log off or watch their avatars endlessly text-shout Arnold Schwarzenegger’s “Get to the choppaaaaaaa!” tagline from *Predator*.<sup>33</sup>

This is how a Futurist plays a videogame: by playing hard with the structure of gamespace so it buckles, bursts, sweats, and grimaces, like a Stelarc cyborg. Dada grieved seated audiences through their wacky performances from up onstage. Grievers reach into the virtual actors already “onstage” and have them grieve their masters offstage, sitting at home on their computers. Out-of-control avatars, already comically fantastic in their fur, armor, and torpedo tits, became hyper-spectacular (rather than merely spectacular). Whatever fantasy, fiction, or business, people were sustaining is pulled into turmoil revealing new comical handles on the virtual world as a thing to be fundamentally played with. Dada’s nihilism was fueled by trauma, but grievers’ nihilism stems from the reverse, from apathy. Dadaists lived in a time of cultural turmoil when machines were churning, burning, and eating up, the world. The machines won. The world, now embedded in the machine, is too antiseptic and stable for avant-garde grievers. Or, more accurately, it is the worlds of play they see online, from *Habbo Hotel* to *World of Warcraft*, which are too safe and separate. Art was the mechanism through which Futurism and Dada funneled their energies. The direction of energy is reversed in our simulation age. Grievers react to

technoculture by directing energy directly back into technoculture, through its social technologies. Instead of mixing art into life, they mix life back into entertainment.

Where the Dadaists worked with the materials of contemporary art—poetry, painting, music, and theatrical performance—griefers today work with virtual environments, games, and online communities as their materials. Where the Dadaists attacked the cultural category of art, griefers attacked the cultural category of videogames as entertainment. By probing the limitations of technoculture, they suggest alternate forms of communication and methods for exercising political power in an age of digital simulation. Griefers operate on the extreme end of contemporary remix culture. Unlike griefers, most of us would rather not constantly struggle to get our bearings by reaching deeper and more rigorously into our technological and social codes. Griefers extend remix culture into a new territory of media practice that only seems chaotic. If their tactics are assimilated, better and more widely understood, the parasitism and nihilism will be sloughed off as new conventions cohere in their wake. Society has unpredictable ways of adjusting to initially disruptive technologies—and it is in “disruptive technologies” that griefers specialize.

There must be a creative core to any radically destructive media practice. To be so plastic as we wield media forms requires an understanding of how digital media is constructed technically and deployed socially. In spite of their iconoclastic attitude, griefers need considerable skill as well as talent and flair. They must understand enough code to hack and exploit network protocols, just as Dadaists required a grasp of art history and theory, such as traditional compositional and theatrical techniques. Like Picasso mastering the technical fundamentals of drawing before launching into cubism with Braque, griefers have to know what the rules are

in order to reshuffle them into such outlandish configurations. Although griefers remain anonymous, their social cohesion, tenacity, and focus are remarkable. In order to challenge what virtual worlds mean and are, griefers coordinate groups of hundreds or thousands so that they can log into a game at a certain time and execute specific scripts and behaviors as a virtual flash mob.

### *Procedural Iconoclasm*



Figure 3-21 The W-Hat's, a grieve community in *Second Life*, features a Death Star blasting the World Trade Center, flying penises, swastikas.

Gamespace, as we are accustomed to it, is held together through scopophilia, a power fetish over sight and seeing things. To see is to command. In videogames,

the desire to see the space, via maps, overhead views, high-fidelity control of camera movement, and so on, structures how we situate ourselves within it—as its operator, controller, pilot, gunman, etc. For historical context, Nazis were visually obsessed with identifying Jews by sight, or, how the witch hunters of Salem poring over naked bodies of accused girls for the telltale satanic mark. The reverse of scopophilia is iconoclasm. Iconoclasm inundates sight with abject images that threaten the authority and stability of sight itself. Grieferers use iconoclasm to pull the rug out from our fetishes of seeing space, our enemies, and ourselves, via avatars, ships, etc., in operational and visually efficient ways. Volcanoes of spewing shit, swarms of squirming dildos, horribly racist and sexist images, spray and spittle forth. Grieferers are adept at wielding the force of iconoclasm in subtler ways than pouring fecal rain, however. For example, an effective way to troll *Second Life* residents during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election was by creating “Bush 2008” banners, because it was a joke on several levels.

Griefer iconoclasm might be interpreted as idiotic retaliation against the political correctness oppressing discourse in contemporary culture, but this scratches only the surface. Grieferers exploit the desire that we operate by in the virtual, namely, that we want representational authority of gamespace to be equitable to representation in meatspace. Players know the virtual is predicated on fluid bits, in theory; yet in practice, they enforce the authority of the virtual image as stable and reliable. By stuffing the player’s vision with a rank celebration of procedural fecundity, the fluid nature of videogames beyond the usual comfortable limits is felt. Previously latent potential is now undeniably present in the teeming virtual filth. The tangibility of utter malleability irrupts through the veil of the solid fiction. Or, in simpler terms, grieferers castigate the reduction of gamespace into the usual optics of an ego-space:

Wherever someone forgets that a game isn't important, we will be there.  
Wherever anyone puts themselves above common sense, or puts fantasy before reality, we will be there to tear their lives apart. Excuse me while I masturbate, make some Macaroni & Cheese, switch camo pants and ask Mommy for the car this evening. After all, what is a man? A miserable pile of secrets. We will expose your secrets, force you to face your demons, and demand you listen to your own stupidity.<sup>34</sup>

Not only is fantasy rendered an empty pursuit by this apathetic youth, but the pursuit of constructing an everyday life—as defined by our entertainment culture—is also rejected. Postmodernism has got these griefers down. These budding little fascists, at least rhetorically, long for an apocalypse to wipe away all the lies and filth of the social world—a conservative gesture for the ages. It isn't much of a stretch to see in them servants of the Judeo-Christian "G-d," the one who cannot be named. They enforce the commandment against graven images, in this case against *graven procedures*, the golden calf of digital representation. The quote nearly gets verbatim the famous line by author Andre Malraux, "What is a man? A miserable little pile of secrets." Peeking behind the veil, Malraux also said, "The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random between the profusion of matter and of the stars, but that within this prison we can draw from ourselves images powerful enough to deny our nothingness." If griefers see technoculture as a vast wasteland, what alternate configurations of technoculture stir in their nasty little vibrating imaginations? What images do they put forth despite of their iconoclasm? The only image of virtual communities and games griefers seem to propose is one that plays with itself as fluidly as they do. Like any political avant-garde, the goal is its own obsolescence. The young griever above comically laments the fact that his

role in gamespace is forced. Supposedly he must do what he does because other people reduce the virtual into a flat looking-glass that services their small, visionless egos. By conversion or contagion, they want nothing more than a world where procedural iconoclasm is impossible because the world “grieves” and plays with itself; a world infected to its rumbling intestinal core, where nothing can be iconic of any norm.

### *New Communities, New Conventions*

Avant-garde grievers do not just peel eyeballs, but also patch up perception into newly chopped and blended images. They show new ways to see and play with videogames that appear abject at first but could be synthesized into technoculture. Bartle might be right about the teleology of grieving, but it would not be the developmental path of an individual as Bartle assumes. If Bartle were correct, grieving would be phase in the evolutionary path of technoculture as a collective. From this precarious view, grievers appear symptomatic of our collective future, just as Dada and Futurism were symptomatic of the present, generations beforehand. How can avant-garde grievers help us collectively reinvent the rules by which we frame and play with technoculture? What we do know is that a handful of Dada artists fed upon, appropriated, and mimicked the random violence of the “Great War” in their playful treatment of art. Through their deconstructive-reconstructive processes, Dada, along with the Futurists, invented techniques of montage and cut-and-paste, which are now conventional and widespread.

Grievers mimic the symbolic violence inherent to digital entertainment in its reduction of all experience to desire, and of being into self-similar categories, routines, and bits. Grievers exaggerate the violence of proceduralization that

entertainment is predicated upon, and funnel it back into the system. Our reflection appears abject and disfigured. If history is an indicator, new conventions are lurking in the soup. Like a spiteful invitation, grieving challenges us to rediscover how virtual spaces are constructed and why they operate as they do. How did all those phalluses spawn at the CNET conference? Why did the blue cubes and the text blocks, “Get to the choppaaaaaaa!” propagate in the attack in Albion Park? They are artifacts shed by a computer worm, a self-replicating program. Unlike a virus, a computer worm doesn’t attach itself to another program, but roves through servers in procedural autonomy. The griever’s perspective is the perspective of the worm: *Second Life* might be a virtual world, but it’s also a rhizome of thousands of computer terminals sharing descriptions of objects and behaviors that millions of bald apes are limply clicking at.



Figure 3-22 Logo banner of the Patriotic Nigras, a griever group accidentally founded on 7chan.org in 2006.

The Patriotic Nigras is a griever community that accidentally formed in 2006 via 7chan, an anonymous image board. An anonymous user called “MudKips Acronym” posted a message on 7chan asking if *Second Life* was “raidable.” The virtual military tactic of “raiding” comes from MMO gaming, in which, to defeat an enemy boss, a mass of mutually anonymous players bands together as a mob. Members of the 7chan community had periodically raided other websites, image boards and forums, flooding the target with irreverent and inflammatory posts and

comments, sometimes crashing its server. The anonymous community practice of raiding spread to online games, such as *Habbo Hotel*, and from there, *Second Life* as a kind of fusion practice between raiding in games like *WoW* and raiding other forums. Although the core members of the Patriotic Nigras number in the dozens, they operate and cycle through thousands of *Second Life* accounts because they are serially banned.

What is fascinating about the Patriotic Nigras is that their value system is paradoxical. They merge celebratory and iconoclastic wasteful excesses, with clear, kind instruction. The first page of their wiki espouses the importance of open source, “This is a group effort by the Nigras. All of the scripts and tools here are **Open Source**. This means you can steal the code, contribute to the codewriting process, etc.” Within their extensible community, they share griefing techniques via register-free forums and a nonexclusive pedagogy. Anonymous newbies ask questions which are straightforwardly addressed by more knowledgeable, but still anonymous members. They developed an open source client called “Shooped Life” that anyone can use to easily circumvent IP and MAC address bans in *Second Life*. Scripts are commented so anyone can use, modify, and redistribute their changes. For example, they host and freely distribute a malleable, Swiss Army knife of scripts, “Self Replication,” written in native language of *Second Life*:

```
integer WaitTime = 10;
//Time to wait between replications in seconds.
//Must be greater than 0. I recommend more than 10 to avoid a grey goo
fence.
float V = 8;
//Max random speed object will be punted when rezzed.
```



```

string Name = "";
//Don't supply a name unless the name of the object differs from the copy.
vector VelRand() {
    float Angle = (integer)llFrand(360);
    Angle = Angle * DEG_TO_RAD;
    vector Unit = <llCos(Angle), llSin(Angle), V>;
    return (Unit * V); }

default
{
    on_rez(integer start_param) {
        if(Name == "") { Name = llGetObjectNames(); }
        llSetTimerEvent(WaitTime); }
    timer() {
        llRezObject(Name, llGetPos(), VelRand(), ZERO_ROTATION, 1); }
    object_rez(key child) {
        llGiveInventory(child, Name); }
}

```

For programmers, this Self Replication script probably appears pretty simple. All the user must do is declare an instance, location, name, and vector. From there, the script will execute and replicate itself into havoc. The “RezObject” component creates a child object that has in its inventory the entire script above. Parent objects don’t stop creating children after their children have had children, so numerical growth is exponential. The script itself is in flux, continually altered, reposted, and passed around. The mutation and movement of the code outside of *Second Life* mimics its spreading, uncontrollable behavior in the virtual world itself. Rapid adaptations and handoffs overcome countermeasures Linden Lab introduces to

contain the contagion. For example, griefers may run the code through “code obfuscators” so that its functions remain unchanged, but Linden servers will think it’s a new and innocuous script. Even in the short script above there is evidence of an iteration history. Notice that the delay or “WaitTime” between the duplication of an object in the script above occurs after 10 seconds to avoid triggering a “grey goo fence.” A grey goo fence is a countermeasure created by Linden Lab as a response to such scripts. Grey goo fences listen for network anomalies, such as calls repeated too often.

Catherine Fitzpatrick earns a modest income from virtual property in *Second Life* and complains bitterly about griefers: “Fuck, this is a denial-of-service attack ... it’s anti-civilization ... it’s wrong ... it cost me hundreds of US dollars.”<sup>36</sup> Fitzpatrick believes that because griefers aren’t professional philosophers or artists that their work is illegitimate and misreads their efforts, “Griefers aren’t reading Sartre, they’re antitechnological.” Griefers aren’t anti-technological, to the contrary, they celebrate technology, but they do so to excess. A better formulation would be to say that they are pro-technological and anti-cultural, but that’s also a misnomer because it discounts the alteriorities of gamespace that they open up, as well as the communities that they have formed. They push what the technology can do beyond the limits of our ritual constraints.

More problematic for Fitzpatrick, and others like her, who prefer transparent technological control over experimentation, is the fact that griefers are becoming more diverse. The nature of grieving in *Second Life* has recently passed beyond the liquid fecundity of the Patriotic Nigras spewing flying phalluses and feces. Evidence of this fact, the Patriotic Nigras community website suffered a DDoS attack in 2010 and is still down at the time of this writing, and other famous griefers like Plastic

Duck have moved on. In their wake, more ambivalent and diverse griefers are picking up the slack. These griefers are harder to dismiss, not because they read Sartre, but because they understand what they are doing on more numerous levels, and use this knowledge to grief in more divergent and nuanced ways. They reference videogame history, Tolstoy's politics, Warhol's factory, and avant-garde theater. They are more flexible in their attitudes toward gamespace, and therefore are able to blend the magic circle even more artfully than the Patriotic Nigras. The Patriotic Nigras are celebratory of the malleability of gamespace, poking procedural sticks into so many little piles of secrets, and therefore are a bit like the Futurists. New communities make for new conventions. The new wave of grieving is more like Dada: ambivalent toward the machine, more self-critical and confused as to whether they are techno-evangelists, devilish Luddites, or just friendly ghosts in the machine.

## *Sweet Griefing*

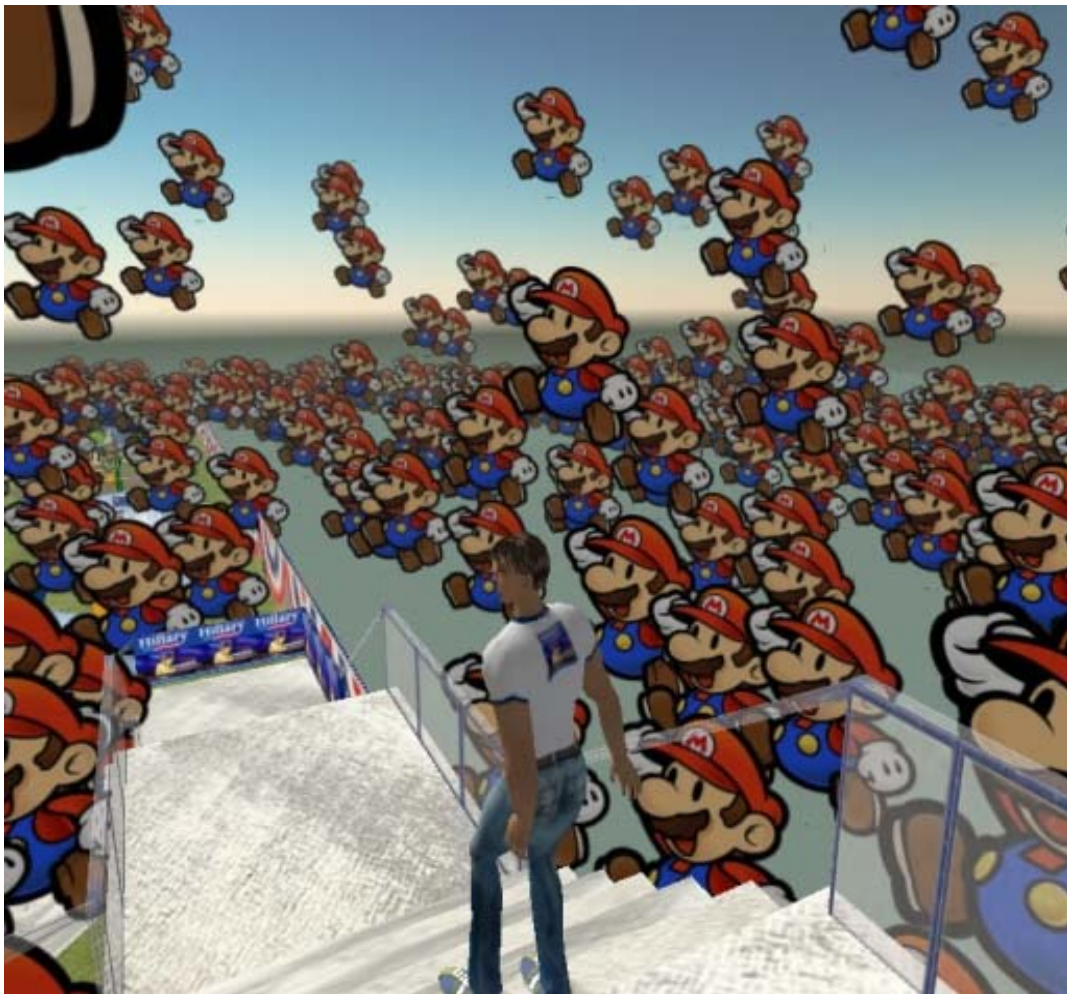


Figure 3-23 *Grey Goo Number Nine*, scripted by Gazira Babeli, calls down a rain of Super Marios, referencing the history of videogames within *Second Life*.

Gazira Babeli takes griefing to another level. For one, Babeli politely speaks with people as she grieves them. The iconoclasm is reserved for gamespace, for the virtual world of avatars and objects. The text channel isn't flooded with nonsense. Instead, she explains how she is able to conjure a torrent of Mario images. As your framerate slows down because your computer can't render the flood of objects she conjured, at least she will keep you company and explain what's going on. She'll

give a link to the script she's using, such as *Grey Goo Number Nine*.<sup>37</sup> The first few lines of code read:

```
// Grey Goo Number Nine
// (cc) 2006 Gazira Babeli - gazirababeli.com
// =====
// This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
// Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License
// http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
// =====
// HOW TO: Drag/Copy/Add this script on a prim
list GG = ["abe4de67-77e8-2fe2-c20d-118e7549b7b8", // super mario
          "6a32f6a0-c5f0-a7f6-1911-ca43e804dda6", // warhol banana
```

The swarming elements in her work aren't goatse holes, Bush banners, or racial caricatures, but images of videogame history and art history. In one piece she writes, "'griefing is a bourgeois concept' —Leon Trotsky." It's an invitation-provocation to play, her introduction a bit forced, but the company still warm. In essence, Babeli is a *sweet griever*. Contemporary cultural pirate, Hakim Bey (aka Peter Lambourn Wilson), suggests how sweetness and ruthlessness, or philanthropy and theft, can be swept up into single hybrid actions:

A conspiracy of artists, anonymous as any mad bombers, but aimed toward an act of gratuitous generosity rather than violence—at the millennium rather than the apocalypse—or rather, aimed at a *present moment* of aesthetic shock in the service of realization and liberation. [...] Art tells gorgeous lies that come true.<sup>38</sup>

The political avant-garde will not get very far if it is dismissible as simply nihilistic. Returning to Babeli, she is disrupting the flow to give “residents” of *Second Life* a gift, perhaps unwanted, but a gift nevertheless. Babeli navigates the intersection of ordinary, play, and the chaotic real, and invites us to join her. Even the scripts she authors are thoughtfully commented with instructions and warnings so newbies and the procedurally semi-illiterate can use them. The fact that her gestures are simultaneously gentle and aggressive opens the experience up so her targets can’t simply dismiss her as a griever, while they can’t wholly trust her, either. She calls herself a “code performer” that creates “unauthorized installations,” but Babeli is more like an odd hybrid of the “trickster” figure and the “guide,” to use Joseph Campbell’s mythology. Trickster-guides bring the gift of knowledge with twist. The trickster-guide fusion is alien to the degree that we believe knowledge to be a wholly serious business. Such figures shouldn’t aren’t as alien as they might seem, however. Cultural history is full of such figures. For example, “Mephistophilis” guided Faust through the outer reach of knowledge while toying with Faust’s life and soul. The trope is not unknown in videogames, either. GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System) in the FPS game franchise, *Portal*, is a kind of trickster-guide, teaching the player while also trying to kill her. The distinction between GLaDOS and Gazira is important to make. In *Portal*, spatial continuity, physical forces, and the narrative itself become twisted in an exquisitely designed, witty mind-bending puzzle. In *Portal* it is expected that GLaDOS will play tricks on you, but it is also expected, that the tricks are meant to be solved. For Gazira, it is not about solutions but the tricks themselves, about exploring the qualities, the accidental nature, of gamespace beyond conventions and the flow. It is not about solving or beating the tricks, but playing through them and with them.

It's interesting to contrast the openness of Gazira's grieving with the more elitist forms of grieving in which every conceivable social rule and game convention must be twisted in-world, as, for example, with the Patriotic Nigras. The Patriotic Nigras are pure guides to each another and pure tricksters to others. Babeli is less dichotomous. She partially guides the very people she grieves, taking political avant-garde practice to another level. She openly questions what she is doing. Babeli represents a phase-shift in what grieving will come to mean in technoculture. As grieving becomes easier and more prevalent, its tools, techniques, and the "conventions" of grieving will become more integrated into normal gameplay experiences. Babeli generates a prefigurative politics, an expressive politics. In the *Hacker Manifesto*, Mackenzie Wark describes how expressive politics operates within its own target,

Expressive politics does not seek to overthrow the existing society, or to reform its larger structures, or to preserve its structure so as to maintain an existing coalition of interests. It seeks to permeate existing states with a new state of existence, spreading the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life.<sup>39</sup>

Babeli realizes, in the act of protest itself, the kind of virtual world she wants. For example, if street protesters throw bottles and rocks at police firing rubber bullets, the protesters are only mirroring the same administered violence that they are protesting. But if protesters throw teddy bears at the police instead—which actually became a demonstration tactic against the World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, Washington in 1999—then they are enacting their positive vision of the world within the act of protest itself. The double negation turns it into a positive act, generative of an alternate way of being. It presents an answer within its own

question. Patriotic Nigras nurture one another outside of gamespace, within their own forums and community. But Babeli realizes, within her momentary act of sweet grieving, the shared authority, openness of being, and liquidity of control that she desires for gamespace in general. She heals and wounds simultaneously — thus spreading both to the world at large.

### *Simulation Spelunking into Hypertrophy*

What would it mean if griefers were prefigurative of a future mainstream? Why not? It has happened many times over with the historical avant-garde. Crashes or disturbances in do not have to be culturally framed as such, but rather as opportunities for reconfiguration. In a generation we may look back at all the spoofing, worms, rez cages, grey goo, and grid attacks, and they appear differently. Perhaps they will have become familiar gestures, everyday technocultural grammar commonly understood and used, just as yesterday's avant-garde tactics of cut-and-paste and montage editing. This might be the dream of Wark. Expounding on Baudrillard, Wark, believes there is only The Cave, that the world is a simulation with nothing outside of it—but he articulates a course of action that leads right through the heart of gamespace:

The gamer might still be tempted to try to leave The Cave, to substitute for its artificial sun an order held in place by one that really burns in a visible sky. But here is the paradox: you only know the value of that sun, its energy, the consequences of turning it into this or that allocation of resources, because there is a game. Only by going further and further into gamespace might one come out the other side of it, to realize a topology beyond the limiting forms of the game.<sup>40</sup>



What new forms of emergent gameplay are possible when gamers, aided by the spreading doctrine of sweet grievers, worm “further and further” into gamespace? What is gameplay when it is not oriented towards a closed control, if the graphics aren’t as Euclidian, if identities aren’t so Cartesian? What is movement in gamespace when that is not subservient to flow? Why can’t gamespace warp, fold, or become hyper-dimensional? Why must we fly around in one virtual body? Why not a hundred? Why not a particle swarm? Why not bounce back and forth between opposing goals as we play? Because grievers are so versatile, they wed logical thinking and irrational hubris. From here we can compare and contrast the nature of the formal avant-garde with the political avant-garde of games. Formal artists invite people to play with videogames in a hypertrophic way; they make works available for download or install them in a gallery space. Political artists don’t wait for us to download or to traipse into a gallery on our own accord, they force us, perhaps sweetly force us, us to play. They say, hey, let’s go simulation spelunking!

The political avant-garde does not need figures like Gazira Babeli to beat us, or to allure us, into worming further into gamespace. We can open up experience beyond the rituals of play without them. The very nature of a technological entity floating around by itself can do the trick. A cousin script to self-replicating scripts like *Grey Goo Number Nine* is *CopyBot*. If a player can click on something in *Second Life*, she can replicate it into her inventory using *CopyBot*. This means a player can walk into a virtual store and duplicate its whole inventory without paying. Sellers of skins, weapons, architectures, etc., enforce scarcity in order to make money (Linden dollars are convertible to US dollars). *CopyBot* therefore threatens the social fabric and the digital economy of *Second Life* with devaluation. Kevin Lim points out that this could positively transform the virtual world by way of a comparison to the

replicator in *Star Trek*, “after such a machine was invented, currency as we knew it ceased to be function. Since everyone had the capability to create (replicate) anything they desire, capitalism as we knew it died, and the new dawn of perfect Marxian philosophy was adopted by the Federation.”<sup>41</sup> *CopyBot* and goo scripts make use of latent affordances of gamespace, such as recursion and object-oriented code. The digital is predicated on flowing exchange of social and economic capital. Cascading changes occur to gamespace when the economic order is affected, and it is through these mechanisms, that it can be most easily shaken.

From the perspective of the scripts and its users, the actions are more about rulemaking than rule-breaking. To only see rupture, transgression, and breakages in their wake, is to look at the events from the perspective of the structural order itself. Galloway and Thacker outline the tenuous distinction between destruction and avant-garde alterity, “The goal is not to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion but to push technology into a hypertrophic state [...] There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: to *retreat ahead of it*.”<sup>42</sup> It is easy to conflate confusion with destruction, to see avant-garde openness as negation. What appears destructive at first might be in a double take, hypertrophy, worming “further and further into gamespace,” as Wark describes. A rippling, tectonic reordering, and (very convincing) apparent “breakdown” of gamespace doesn’t mean that experience is itself closed off and lost, perhaps the game is actually just opening up, it is now getting good—playing the game through as it redefines itself, becomes the game. Collectively, avant-garde figures and events are forerunners of a future form of gamespace—that is, if gamers and designers are able to desire caressing and grappling with gamespace itself, worming into the fabric of gamespace, as much as we desire flow, and accruing social and economic capital, in gamespace.

## Critical Anonymous



Figure 3-24 The faceless and relentless nature of corporate capitalism is satirized and mimicked in Anonymous culture.

Galloway and Thacker distinguish how the political avant-garde must adapt to shifting technologies in *The Exploit*: “Future avant-garde practices will be those of non-existence [...] devoid of any *representable* identity. Anything measurable might be fatal.”<sup>43</sup> To see and name is to command, but to identify in technoculture, to trace an IP, for example, is to nullify. Griefing arises from Anonymous culture online, which has taken this to heart more than any other group. To understand the

“cultural contribution” of avant-garde grieving, it is necessary to touch upon Anonymous culture. The origin of the term is the fact that “anonymous” is the default name for unsigned posts or comments on message boards or blobs, technically designating everyone who speaks through these websites. From a modest beginning, “Anonymous” has come to associate extreme scalability of group and scope of activity, erasure of individual identity, denial of personal culpability, and the removal of any barrier of entry to participate in the social group. Anonymous has adopted as its face the empty corporate suit, an ironic image of conformity. What is debilitating in the context of the corporate life becomes liberating online. If griefers are identified, they can be traced and stopped, perhaps even arrested. The shadowy nature of corporations hiding behind lobbyists, politicians, contingents of lawyers, and the like, are emulated by Anonymous. Individual griefers see themselves not unlike an anonymous mass of workers, cogs of the corporate machine. They comically fantasize themselves to be an inhuman, hive-like entity: “We are Anonymous. We are Legion.” A fusion of the biomechanical Borg species from *Star Trek* and New Testament biblical evil (Christ cured a possessed man in Luke: “Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Legion,’ he replied, because many demons had gone into him”). Anonymous has entered the physical world to protest outside of Scientology buildings. According to National Public Radio, Anonymous opposes “the tactics the Church of Scientology uses to control information about itself” rather than the “controversial nature of Scientology.”<sup>44</sup> These events were less of an attack on the religion, and more of a promotion of hacker culture and the notion that information “wants to be free.” Through DDoS attacks, Anonymous took down the Scientology website for a week in January 2008, after which the Church moved its online business to a company specializing in safeguarding websites from such attacks.<sup>45</sup> In response, Scientology has launched the equivalent of a marketing campaign against Anonymous, for

example, in its 2008 DVD *Anonymous Hate Crimes*. The Anonymous movement against Scientology is called “Project Chanology.”

The “chan” of Chanology is a reference to 4chan.org and derivative chan sites that have been credited with the formation of Anonymous culture itself. *Time* magazine: “You may not realize it, but 4chan has probably touched your life. Possibly inappropriately.”<sup>46</sup> *The Guardian’s* description of 4chan as “at once brilliant, ridiculous and alarming” captures the ambiguous reaction of popular media, which recognizes that it is both the target and benefactor (in terms of entertainment value) of Anonymous. Anonymous culture is global, for example, a sister board for Russians is 2ch.ru, and when it is occasionally goes down, Russian visitors will temporarily use 4chan. Most visible to the West, however, is 4chan, which has spawned dozens of “internet memes” that have penetrated into the cultural mainstream.<sup>47</sup> The most famous meme from 4chan is the “image macro,” a particular configuration of funny picture and caption text. Image macros are also known as a “lolcats,” because the first example, and the many thousands that followed, were of cats enjoying “Caturday.” Launched in 2003, 4chan’s original purpose was for posting images of and discussing anime and manga. The site was to serve several dozen odd Japanophiles from a special interest group called “Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse” at SomethingAwful.com, a forum-based website of irreverent humor. From this precarious beginning, the sub-boards on 4chan proliferated quickly to cover an array of interests from videogames, health, fitness, pornography, and so on—which together total around 44 sub-boards. The sub-board dedicated to any random topic, the /b/ board, became the most popular. It has only one rule to mitigate the site from Federal intervention, which is an injunction against child pornography. Visitors and contributors are referred to as /b/ or /b/tards, and post anything and everything that sparks “lulz,” a bastardization of the leetspeak

acronym “LOL,” or “laugh out loud.” The appeal of 4chan.org has made it a popular forum frequented by millions of regular unique visitors a month (about half from the U.S.).

Fifteen years old when he launched 4chan in 2003, “moot” or “Christopher Poole,” wanted it to operate more simply and in a more accessible way than SomethingAwful.com, which uses the common PHP bulletin-board scripting language. Speaking at MIT and Yale in 2008, he explained why 4chan eschews logins, email verification, and registries. 4chan’s software is simple and interface incredibly bare. Both factors came from a Japanese web board called 2channel, the most popular and active bulletin-board community in the world.<sup>48</sup> Daisuke Okabe, a researcher in new media at Keio University, explains: “On 2-channel, there’s a culture of self-determination that doesn’t exist elsewhere. It’s widely acknowledged as a special place on the Internet, where people can combat the mass media on a grass-roots level.”<sup>49</sup> A single call for help posted to 2channel yielded 830,000 newly folded origami cranes at the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Memorial in a matter of days. It has also potentially led to group suicide, as when threads read: “28 years has been enough. I live in Hiroshima. I plan to die within the month. Will somebody come with me? I don’t have the courage to go alone.” The most important interface feature 4chan took from 2channel was the ability of visitors to upload images and comments instantly and anonymously. Like 2channel, most posts are submitted by “Anonymous,” meaning the person uploading has left the name field blank. The result is a panopticon in reverse, where nobody can see anybody, and yet everybody can speak from the center.<sup>50</sup> It was the crowded and filthy technocultural “Petri dishes” of Something Awful, 4chan and countless similar sites that incubated the numbers, desire, anonymity and collective know-how to conduct and coordinate grieving. As expected, the grieving community has fanned out to other forums more

specific to gaming such as the Patriotic Nigras, leaving sites like 4chan and 7chan living fossils of grieving culture suspended in primordial form, although they are a thriving domain for Anonymous culture in general.



Figure 3-25 Thousands of image macros created on 4chan during the 2008 election reflexively played with the representational practices of digital media.

To start a new thread on 4chan requires an image to be uploaded, which is often digitally manipulated or wholly created in Photoshop or MS Paint. Building off this basic principle, the random board has exploded in the number and range of subjects, ranging from saccharine cute kittens to morbid Al Qaeda decapitations with motivational quotations underneath. The analysis of popular culture in the posts varies wildly. A slurry of images explored hundreds of little facets in the cult

of personality surrounding then-candidate Obama (savior, assuager of white guilt, and so on); as well as Palin and McCain. Innumerable aspects of the presidential race were examined on 4chan through reworked screenshots, moments, videos, and sound bites, from media outlets like CNN or Comedy Central. The media excerpts inundated the forums but were also reworked and critically remixed. The sheer numbers of 4chan contributors rapid-fire preparing images to post in Photoshop and Microsoft Paint, aggregate into a novel, dizzying, and kaleidoscopic criticality. It is this characteristic that grievers further articulate and transfer into gamespace.

In recent years, it seems one thread every few months has had a broader impact on popular culture. For example, in 2008, David C. Kernell, illegally gained access into the Yahoo account of Republican Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. Kernell posted images of her private emails on 4chan (mixing tech savvy with idiocy, he accidentally included some his own personal information in the images).<sup>51</sup> When moot provided testimony in the federal case against Kernell, moot revealed that he actually keeps IP log activity of 4chan users (at least posters who get banned for posts that break the rules) for a minimum of five months.<sup>52</sup> This undermines the community's level of actual anonymity. It is regrettable that 4chan represents the popular cultural "extreme" of Anonymous culture (according to *Wired* magazine, Fox News, etc.), when it is not as anonymous as it could be. Why moot keeps such lengthy records of IP logs is unclear, but it contradicts the nature of the site and the community.

It requires a basic level of media literacy and agency in order to become, at least minimally, a media producer and critical remixer. In aggregate effect is profound. Even if it isn't as "anonymous" as it seems. 4chan, and similar communities, facilitate the open media production of a headless horde, human-



driven cellular automata that speak a collective “critical” language. It is a language that nearly unrecognizable to a traditional community of media theorists whose expect “criticism” comes in the form of books, essays, and blog post. “Critical Anonymous” might be vast and shallow, but richly patterned waves irrupt and roll through the community and once in a while out to technoculture at large, certainly merit greater critical consideration.

## **Beyond Negation**

The most burdensome weight the political avant-garde has been asked to carry is standard-bearer of “negation” and “opposition.” Marcel Janco, a key historical Dadaist, argued that there were two sides, two “speeds” of Dada, a fact that is surprisingly overlooked. Janco wishes critics would pay more attention to “the prophetic work of the positive Dada, which opened art a new road [...]”<sup>53</sup> Revisionist art critics like Johanna Drucker and Hal Foster are duly correcting the record as well. Drucker states the political avant-garde, “is not what the academy has made of it. Every instance of playful engagement, of serious exchange, of complex attraction and adoration and longing” has been overwritten.<sup>54</sup> Drucker continues, “the legacy of oppositional criticism, of a negative position claiming moral superiority and distance from those ideologies [...] can't be sustained any more. Mythic though they were, these belief systems do not accurately describe either our current condition or our past history.”<sup>55</sup> The same was true of academics evaluating video art in the 70s or net art of the 90s. This practice is also widespread today, except increasingly it is capitalism itself that is the prime antagonist that the avant-garde must attack. The Rita Raley values the contemporary avant-garde as having “imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism,” which, I believe is the right formulation, but too specific to the economic order, omitting

other cultural structures. Sutton-Smith alludes to play as being beyond our adaptations, as *being otherwise*. Advanced capitalism is not the only force propagating the familiar Darwinian adaptations in society. Technocentrism and the contemporary cult of science are also reductive of being. The climate of ideas that doggedly reign in Truth in academia is stifling in its hegemony, as Feyerabend has suggested.

Academia has eliminated *difference* in its account of the historical avant-garde, the very same charge it accuses of digital capitalism. Not only do academics collapse the formal (as being complicit, conservative, to exist on its own) into the political. It also collapses the political to only include academic leftist politics. For Latour, to actually see our contemporary social reality, we must let go of modernity, we must realize how we are modern, and how we are not modern. We have to accept both *categories* and *hybrids* as viable ways of being in and structuring the world. But we are only hybrid. Liberal academics can't touch a form without reading political meaning into them on some level. Like paranoid psychics, we see evidence of social injustice lurking in every sensation. Like traumatized victims, we rerun the same scene of violation over and over—transforming the psychological ruptures of capitalism to the very thing we cling to that insures our reality is solid, vital, and necessary. More inclusive in my politics than Drucker, I argue that if we are to accept a social construction of the avant-garde, we must also accept radical diversities in its construction.

If we only allow categories to rule (modern) or only hybrids to rule (postmodern) we are stuck in a Catch-22. Our categories and our hybrids are both stifled, making true diversity untenable. Drucker's way out is another great hybrid, one she calls "complicit formalism" which is itself a sophisticated blend of form and

politics. We can spread our domain wider than Drucker, by way of Latour. Avant-garde politics is diversely rich, but also uncomfortable and contradictory. We don't have one melting pot, but many. Academic leftists are not wrong, but they don't have exclusive rights over which avant-garde politics are "politically correct." We can add dimensions to our understanding if we force ourselves extend it into different frameworks. The approach I have taken in my analysis of avant-garde videogames is to be "radically inclusive." I ask that we allow the formal and political avant-gardes to exist as such: formalism is not forced into a political framework, or the reverse. The chapters of this dissertation may be serially contradictory, approaching videogames from a series of art historical vantage points ranging from the formal, to the political, to the narrative. But internally to each chapter, these approaches are self-consistent, elaborating a viable trajectory from which to push videogames in an avant-garde direction. Not to be too modern and categorical, I cross the wires and discuss hybridity. I have provided examples, such as my analysis of the game, *Adam Killer*, in the radical formal chapter in which I examine the sociopolitical implications of the dominant click-to-shoot mechanical convention of videogames, which *Adam Killer* exaggerates into a palpable form. However, I have applied the overall philosophy of a "radical inclusivity" which structures this dissertation, to also structure the logic of this chapter. In this chapter I allow various forms of "political" to exist as such, as I have examined different griefers that are variously nihilistic, or fascist, or liberal, for example. We must accept the politics of the videogame avant-garde as being "metapolitical" rather than partisan, to borrow the term from Alain Badiou.

When the game community forces the avant-garde into partisan politics, seeing it as solely an anti-capitalist, leftist guerrilla, they are in highly respected company, sitting comfortably with the Critical Art Ensemble, Rita Raley, and so on. I

critiqued Mary Flanagan for collapsing art into “expression” in the introductory chapter. This is not the last collapse for Flanagan, however, in her study of the “avant-garde” in videogames: “*Critical Play* is the first book to examine alternative games, and use such games as models to propose a theory of avant-garde game design [...]”<sup>56</sup> It is also in realm of politics that Flanagan’s approach becomes idealistic and revisionary of the avant-garde, both historical and present. Politics is reduced to activism, and only in the contemporary, progressive vein. The status quo should only be transformed according to socialist ideals, social justice, or identity politics of the disenfranchised:

Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and occasionally, intervention. [...] Activist approaches to media are important to the study of digital culture precisely because of media's inherent imbalances. Indeed, issues of gender inequity, racial or ethnic inequity, language, class – these imbalances are also manifest in the historic imbalances among privilege and technology production.<sup>57</sup>

While most of us share Flanagan’s desire to support art that attempts to right the wrongs of history, to force the avant-garde in general, and the avant-garde of videogames in particular, to fit our identify politics or wealth equity plans, is itself an injustice. Flanagan undermines her own agenda of inclusivity, participation, and diversity by prescribing too much. Flanagan limits avant-garde play as “critical play,” and further to those videogames that are readable as critical, are ostensibly political, and advance a progressive agenda.

Contemporary art theorists, Krzysztof Ziarek, along with Johanna Drucker and Hal Foster, are striving to open art up beyond the demand it be “critical” or be

judged according to its propensity to wage criticism. Ziarek advocates that political art be allowed to develop “art’s distinctive capacity to outstrip and undermine critique,” in his essay “Beyond Critique, Art and Power.”<sup>58</sup> Although non-progressive politics is decreasingly present in the humanities, we can’t overwrite alterity. We tend to ignore forces that might be read as too anarchist, nihilist, fascist, conservative, spiritual, religious, in our treatments of the historical or contemporary political avant-garde. Like the Critical Art Ensemble or Rita Raley, Mary Flanagan doesn’t use or correlate the first historical political avant-garde, Futurism, to a contemporary avant-garde of games. Presumably, this is because, despite of its camp and comic nature, there are also distasteful, misanthropic, and hyper-masculine energies within it. Academics discussing an avant-garde of games prefer to reference the more politically ambivalent movements such as Dada or Happenings of the 60s, as these hew closer to the academic political climate. This is a taboo to break, to include and account for the highly problematic and contradictory “cultural contributions” of Black Panthers, fascists, racists, nihilists, and all those who fall outside our platform, while also accounting for the acceptable contributions of liberal and progressive avant-garde movements and figures. But if we ignore the campy superhuman thrusts of Futurism or the spiritual philosophy of Kandinsky’s program of a political avant-garde, for example, we cannot grasp the kaleidoscopic and accidentally-collective nature of the political avant-garde. Avant-garde politics blends centrality and alterity *of all types*, not just the alterities we prefer. No one “owns” the magic circle and the avant-garde is not governed by some political “left” or “right,” not a “them” or an “us.” We need to allow a non-reductive theory of the avant-garde that can richly account for, but is not restricted to, the current normative pressures of academia.

The political avant-garde doesn't engage in normal political discourse. That is actually what it unworks and reworks: the ways we perpetuate our "political" cultural institutions (regardless of their academic cache). The way academics perpetuate "critical discourse" itself as the singular framing device for art. The political avant-garde tries to redefine the flow of politics and semiotics. Clement Greenberg was right to oppose the avant-garde to both the culture industry and to academia, because these entities mirror each, albeit in monstrous caricature. The avant-garde reveals the powers to which academic ideology, traditional art, and entertainment are beholden, and renders these powers contingent and plastic, for better or worse. The political avant-garde is not owned or defined by fascists or democratic socialists, progressives or mystics. It is these very categories, these types of divisions, the spectrum itself, which the political avant-garde undermines. Academia has fantasized that the political avant-garde as agent or dreamer of revolution. The avant-garde is then redemptive, punitive, or even healing, but always secret agent of some new revolutionary synthesis that will fix, progress, or at least protest the social order. We can reverse this argument to understand the avant-garde in more playful terms, terms that foreground the contingent nature of the magic circle.

The political avant-garde reverses the Hegelian teleology of progress. Teleological progress is understood as a continual evolutionary process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. For example, America has a founding (its thesis), the civil war (its great antithesis), and its present resolution that bonds America together with its own spilled blood (its synthesis). The political avant-garde provides an alternate to teleological thinking. It begins with the premise that the world (of human, machines, etc.) is always a synthesis (that it cannot *not* be a synthesis), and it touches upon our impulsive struggle to perpetually seek an ever-better synthesis.

From this non-Hegelian perspective, we do not need to evaluate the political avant-garde for its effectiveness, or lack thereof, in naming, opposing, negating, mocking, or healing whatever ails us socially and politically—to do that is to conform it to the dominant teleology.

We can evaluate the political avant-garde according to how it affords being in structural alterity, how it opens us up to being in the world in ways that deviate from our own adaptations, whether they are scientific, capitalistic, or functional—such as our training in the efficient use of computer interfaces and networks to extend our agonizing desire for greater control and mastery. The avant-garde helps us unwork power and exist within a logic that is neither dominating (agonistic) nor submissive (instrumental). The constituent parts of the technocultural order are given playful room to drift, giving us some slack to appreciate, not a better synthesis with technology, nor a Rousseauian decoupling from technology via an idiotic “return to nature,” but an inescapably blended and open way of being.

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A. Yes.

Q. And at that time you were able to provide a good deal of information with regard to what happened on your site September 16th, 17th, 2008, right?

A. Yes [...] Yes. I mean, these records are the web server logs. They are not all postings, but they are just activity from the IP address that was provided."

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United States District Court, Eastern District Of Tennessee Northern Division,  
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## CHAPTER 4: COMPLICIT FORMAL: GAMING IN THE CRACKS

### Performance and Play



Figure 4-1 [*giantjoystick*] by Mary Flanagan invites people to spontaneously collaborate to play Atari games.

Mary Flanagan, creator of [*giantjoystick*] (2006), an installation piece, videogame, and performance, summarizes it as a “system of collaboration.” Visitors entering the gallery meet a six-foot tall giant joystick in the middle of the room. It’s wired to an Atari 2600 projecting the classics *Breakout* or *Asteroids* on a large screen. Whenever it is exhibited, a semi-predictable cycle of events occurs throughout the day. Someone in person in the crowd, perhaps a kid, climbs the stairs of the base and tries to push the monument-like stick to control the game. It wobbles. The person, now “onstage,” struggles, unable to affect the game in a meaningful way. A

stranger or friend joins them to manipulate the joystick together. They might even move the avatar in an intentional way onscreen. But now the fire button is out of their foot reach. Someone has to jump on it. The challenge has been externalized from the nostalgic hardware into a theatrical situation in which figuring out how to collectively play as an emergent group, becomes the game. The impact is small and brief but also tangible. Collective investigation, curiosity, and performativity converge on the monument to nostalgic play.

Complicit formalism explores the possible interplay among media. Flanagan blends installation, performance, and videogames in *[giant]Joystick*. Complicit formalism blends modalities of engagement as well, for example, when a gallery-going audience can slip from spectator to actor on a whim in *[giant]Joystick*. It seeks hybridity and mixtures above all else. This avant-garde is formal but also complicit. Radical formalists drill down, mining the form of a particular medium, whether it is a single mechanic or a combination of many or all of its genres. Complicit formalism, instead of reducing or drilling down, adds on and spreads out instead. They make connections with other mediums, histories, and with entertainment in general. The term “complicit formalism” was coined by Johanna Drucker in *Sweet Dreams*, to distinguish contemporary hybrid practices in art from radical formal practice (which Krauss calls “Old-style” or Modern practice, which dominated art in the first half of the 20th century):

Old-style formalism in a modernist mode had a conspicuous allegiance to a kind of formal essentialism or faith in the power of an object to communicate directly as a form. Complicit formalism, by contrast, draws on [...] the material existence of artifacts [which] embodies cultural systems of meaning production in full recognition of their ideological life.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, complicit formalism denies medium-specificity, whereas radical formalism, or the “modernist mode,” asserts medium-specificity. The complicit formal avant-garde doesn’t “advance” videogames as a medium, but, on the contrary, it calls into question if videogames really a “medium” at all and not just an intractably hybrid product of technocultural entertainment. Complicit formal playfully spills over whatever categorical limits it encounters. Whether it is a boundary between mediums, spaces, technologies, emotions, moods, or people, it brings them into an uncomfortable union. This makes it hard to tell where the game ends and the performance hack, playful intimacy, or cybernetic monstrosity, begins. Where the radical formal avant-garde removes familiar characteristics of videogames, complicit formalists leave familiar characteristics intact, adding things on, instead. The complicit formal avant-garde diffuses videogames with theatricality and humor, rather than needling into the specifics of the medium’s dominant technologies, conventions, and sense ratios (McLuhan’s term) or sensorium—in other words, the medium’s form. The result is that the complicit formal games are not as alienating as those of radical formal games. The figures of this avant-garde are the coy Fluxus artist, the game gag, and cyborg player. They are media artists more than videogame artists, or more than artists of a specific medium.



Figure 4-2 *Cockfight Arena* is an exuberant, celebratory videogame performance by C-Level.

Dueling players gesticulate in garish costumes to battle onscreen roosters in *Cockfight Arena* (2001). For spectators and players alike, the plumage and beaked hats draw as much attention to the players' physical presence as the action of animated sprites onscreen. The cumbersome arms and quizzical faces of the players add a theatrical layer on top of the game, similar to the staged theatrics of professional wrestling matches, or the intricate rules of children's slap fight games. Player input in the game is purposely slippery and enigmatic. The motion triggers of the game are floating in the immediate space around each player, who dances and cranes her neck to search them out. Players squeal "how do I play this thing?!" One of its creators, Eddo Stern, observes, "the physicality of the game allowed for players to really perform beyond the confines of something predefined and preprogrammed."<sup>2</sup> The virtual roosters are seemingly aware they are vying for



attention from their player-controllers, because when one is hit, giant indicators of damage float off with a, “DOH!” and “OOF!!” Ambiguity is at the heart of C-Level, the temporary collective behind *Cockfight Arena*, describes itself as a:

cooperative public and private lab formed to share physical, social and technological resources. Its members are artists, programmers, writers, designers, agit-propers, filmmakers and reverse-engineers. Part studio, part club, part stage and part screen; C-Level [...] plays host to various media events such as screenings, performances, classes, lectures, debates, dances, readings and tournaments.<sup>3</sup>

The profusion of descriptors and fusion of categories is typical of complicit formalism. C-Level is public and private, a club and a studio, a place for classes and tournaments, and so on. Another work by C-Level is *Tekken Torture Tournament*, which translates virtual fight damage into physical pain through electrocuting armbands. Where *Cockfight Arena* voluntarily invites the players’ embodied participation, *Tekken Torture Tournament* enforces it, jolting players into a spectacle of Frankensteins who appear surprised to have been corpses. Both pieces use performativity and the body to blend games with a theatrical event, albeit they do so in opposed ways.

## Fluxus

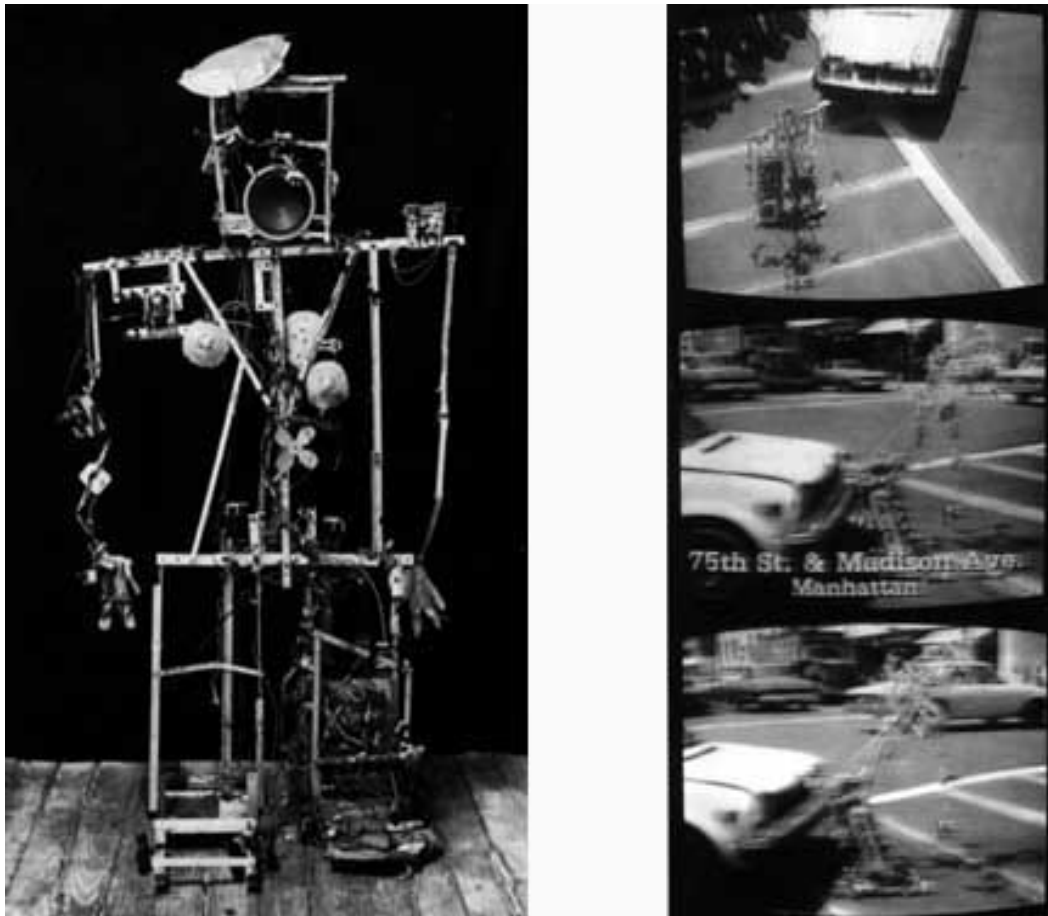


Figure 4-3 A bumbling and pathetic robot, *K-456* (built in 1964), born walking and crapping beans, was ultimately “killed” by a car accident in 1982.

The counter-definition of videogames I presented in the introductory chapter: “play with technoculture,” takes on a broader application here than with the radical formal avant-garde. This is because complicit formalists leave mediums behind in search of new wobbly territories where any cultural meme or technological artifact becomes potential fodder. Key historical predecessor of the complicit formal avant-garde is the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and 70s. Artists like Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono and Dick Higgins are renowned for blending mediums together, and formally appropriating previous movements from Dada to minimal abstraction. As Celia

Pearce has examined with reference to videogames and art, Fluxus embraced the aesthetic of games, blurring the role of artists and active participants through “events,” and purposely awkwardly named: Fluxkits, Fluxfilms, Fluxshops, and the like.<sup>4</sup> Pearce makes the provocative observation that Marcel Duchamp was perhaps more of a “gamer” than an “artist,” and has referred to him as the “patron saint of game art.”

In 1964 Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe created *K-456*, a 20-channel remote-controlled robot. The endearing, precarious, and handmade robot was guided down a New York City street broadcasting John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address while defecating beans. In 1982 Paik led it down the street again, this time into oncoming traffic in a piece called, *The First Catastrophe of the 21st Century*. Robot *K-456* was constantly on the brink of imploding into a twitching pile of parts. The artwork functions as a playfully warped, technocultural mirror. During the Cold War, robots in science fiction, films, and novels impressed us as great villains or heroes, which had incredible powers either way. By representing advanced technology as an anthropomorphized and helpless robot, *K-456* muddled through the limp and grey middle between these two extremes. It was neither a heroic robot nor a menacing robot, but a faulty machine on life-support. *K-456* reflected the ambivalent and awkward material and human world behind our machines. The thing suggested our technocultural world is made of such teetering, hybrid forms; and that technology is neither inherently threatening nor a means of salvation.

A Fluxus historian, Hanna Higgins, argues, “despite its empirical character and reputation to the contrary, Fluxus is better served by an ‘art for art’s sake’ attitude,” which aligns it more closely with Greenberg’s Modern art, but without the seriousness, heroes, and medium-specificity. Above all, what complicit formal

practice like Fluxus takes from the radical formal avant-garde is a commitment to non-semiotic and extra-linguistic art, art resistant to textual or symbolic analysis. Complicit formal art is not a “cipher” as Higgins puts it, not a rhetorical vehicle standing in for something else; it seeks to present reality itself in new ways. Fluxus diverges from Modern in important ways. Fluxus arose at the end of, and partially in response to, the male-dominated abstract expressionist movement, in which artists like Jackson Pollock were regarded as solitary artist-heroes. Fluxus’s aversion to hierarchies and machismo opened the movement to participation by more women than any previous Western avant-garde. Inspirational for Fluxus were “Happenings” where audience and performers merge, and the improvisation spontaneously changes and evolves out of this shared experience. Allan Kaprow explains in 1958 how Happenings grew out of Pollock paintings:

I developed a kind of action-collage, following my interest in Pollock. These action-collages, unlike my constructions, were done as rapidly as possible by grasping great hulks of varied matter: tinfoil, straw, canvas, photos, newspaper, etc....Their placement in the ritual of my own rapid action was an acting-out of the drama of tin soldiers, stories and musical structures, that I once had tried to embody in paint alone. These parts projected further and further from the walls and into the room, and included more and more audible elements....I immediately saw that every visitor to the environment was part of it....I offered him more and more to do until there developed the Happening.<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence that Michael Fried, Greenberg’s protégé, and one of the last Modernist critics, says the art which functions between mediums is theater.<sup>6</sup> His intent was to disparage hybridized art, but this same idea yielded hundreds of

playful tactics for Fluxus. When people do not know what they are supposed to do, when they do not know what they are looking at, the artwork and audience both seem staged within a *mis-en-scène*. This happens when an artist dumps dirt in a gallery, or removes its walls, etc. Art becomes a friendly kind of dare: What is this *thing*? Why is it here? How the audience reacts often says more about them and their cultural moment than about the work itself. The black obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey* was straight out of minimalist art at the time of its production and the brutish reaction of the hominids to this alien invader was indeed theatrical.

Fluxus resonates with videogames, because the word “fluxus” comes from the Latin word for flow. George Maciunas, an important Fluxus figure, was inspired by the term’s connection to the axiom of Heraclites: We can’t step into the same river twice. In jewelry and ceramics, “flux” is the liquid that lowers the melting point of metal and silicon. Fluxus dissolves boundaries of mediums, categories, thoughts, actions, social relationships, so we can probe the negative space between them. Flux is flow as change, not flow as in the Csíkszentmihályi’s model of losing consciousness in optimal experience, in the zone of coordination where skills are well-suited to challenges. Fluxus games might be understood as a kind of “flow 2.0,” the back-and-forth in the ebb and tide of the sea, where “transformative play” does not spontaneously arise from player energies, but is enabled and maintained, by the artist’s design.<sup>7</sup> Pearce describes how Fluxus artists used the mood and conventions of games to achieve certain artistic effects:

creating something that is framed as a game expresses a certain attitude, a particular posture toward not only the work itself but the ‘audience, and the practice of art-making in general.’ The selection of games as an art medium involves suspension of certain artistic prerogatives. In the words of John

Cage, it requires you as the artist to 'give yourself up.' This does not mean abdicating either control or even aesthetic direction; indeed the craft of game-making lies in the ability to create a balance, to locate the 'sweet spot' between constraints and freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Radical formalism deconstructs and redefines normal flow in games. In complicit formal practice, however, our common expectations of flow are left a bit more intact. Players are pulled, laughed, or *willingly* electrocuted out of habitual practice rather than pushed or prodded out, or *surprisingly* electrocuted. The hybrid formal game does not set up such strong resistances to gameplay, but turns more gently, rolling along unanticipated flow channels.

## Intermedia

John Cage had a strong influence on the formation of Fluxus, especially through his courses and special workshops at Black Mountain College. Cage's most famous composition, *4'33"* (1952) is four minutes and thirty seconds of musical silence. At least the performer is silent. *4'33"* is actually *aleatory music*: composed of the incidental sounds of the collective audience coughing, adjusting in their seats or rustling programs. *4'33"* depersonalized "the composer's work so that sound itself became unmediated in the extreme."<sup>9</sup> The audience listened to the orchestral space as an acoustic mirror. Was this music, theater, performance art, all of these, none of them, something else? One way to frame it is as intermedia:

# Intermedia

## The space between mediums

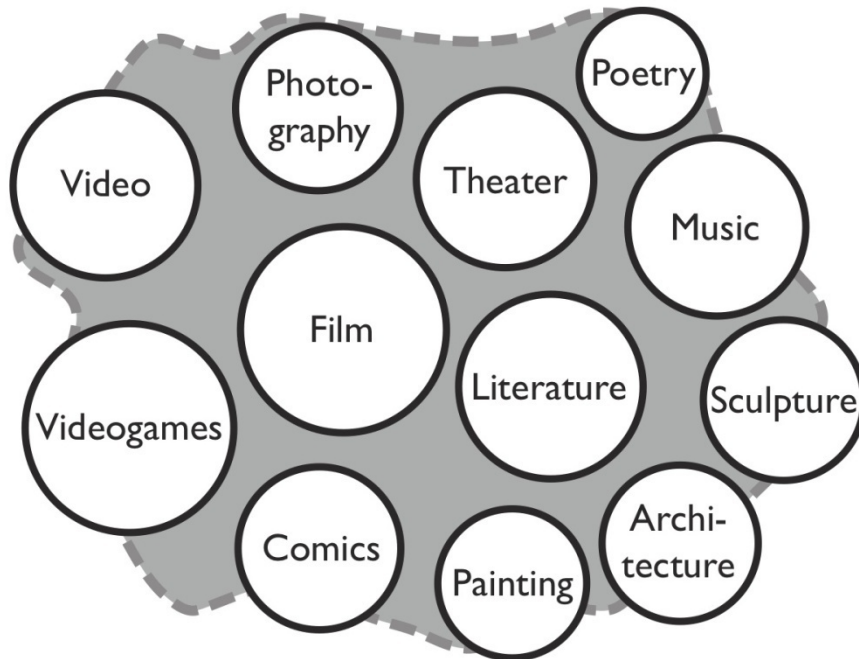


Figure 4-4 *Intermedia* probes the “twilight zone” between mediums in order to question media itself, rather than advance any particular medium.

A central figure of Fluxus, Dick Higgins, advanced the concept of *intermedia* in the 1960s to describe the conceptual space between or among mediums. Higgins borrowed the term “intermedia” from Samuel Coleridge, for whom it meant a century earlier: “the field between the general idea of art media and those of life media.”<sup>10</sup> Imagine that in the graphic diagram of intermedia, the circles of each medium are growing, shrinking, overlapping, and passing over one another in time. Old bubbles pop and dissolve into the nameless mix between. Most pockets of negative space will never be encapsulated by a medium and realized. Fluxus dips into this no man’s land in dives that are light, short, and humorous. Robert Watts’s performance, *F/H Trace* (1963), is like 4’33” but lasts mere seconds. Watts stepped to

center stage and took a bow, and then ping pong balls cascaded out of his French horn and into the audience. The aleatory quality of this piece arose from the chance movement of the spilling balls, the clackity racket they made, and the soft surprise of the audience. Hannah Higgins, recalls, "*F/H Trace* crosses over from music into games of chance; reflections of childhood, in the high-pitched happy sounds of balls hitting the floor; and (of course) vaudeville humor. And yet the work is formally pared down, such that no single element is extricable from the rest."<sup>11</sup> Instead of making a grand vision or statement, the self-deprecating nature of the piece turned it into an invitation to explore the cracks between categories of aesthetic experience.

Intermedia is a means to resist the hegemony of procedurality and proceduralism in technoculture, and prevalent in game studies itself. It is standard for new media theorists to deny the notion of medium-specificity as anachronistic, but then turn around, praising the computer as the final medium that can fully absorb and emulate all others. Friedrich Kittler goes further: "Inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number [...] a digital base will erase the very concept of medium."<sup>12</sup> Proceduralists claim that every medium is reproducible or interchangeable, and that there is only positive space in the digital. The implication is that videogames are only a genre of the master medium of the computer. As if anticipating this collapse half-a-century ago, intermedia provided a useful wedge to crack such assertions apart, well before the fact. It denied the idea of a universal medium and drew our attention not to an all-encompassing whole, but to the unconquerable wild country of blind spots between. Hannah Higgins explains the wedge-like nature of intermedia:

Rather than merely multiplying existing media categories, like multimedia (as in opera which discretely combines theater with music and dance) or mixed



media (as in illustrated stories, presenting complementary images and words), intermedia actively probes the space between the different media.<sup>13</sup>

From a contemporary perspective the non-concept, the probing question, of intermedia is as alien as it is useful. It is of special note that the term “intermedia” gained utility in the historical moment when the dominant representational technologies shifted from *electrical* engineering to *electronic* engineering (which allowed the world to “go digital”). It is now popular to consider new media as an all-consuming simulation able to mirror anything and everything in our lifeworld. It’s as if whatever can’t be digitized doesn’t exist. Intermedia was prescient in challenging our contemporary attitude toward all media, digital and analog alike, as an endlessly extensible network. Intermedia lets us live in the holes and negative space between the lines, if even only for a few awkwardly goofy seconds at a time.

Intermedia art also provides a way for us to resist the all-consuming transnarrative. Designers of new media, whether it is a videogame, or a theme park ride, try to “tell the story by every means possible.” To wholly enclose and immerse people as strongly as possible within a fictional world’s narrative is the goal. For example, *The Pirates of the Caribbean: Battle for Buccaneer Gold* (2000-present) in Florida’s Walt Disney World is a mixed-reality game. The installation has three screen projections beyond the front and sides of a wooden ship. Players, often families, board ship, manning six cannons and helm to steer through the perilous waters of dead pirates. Subtle cues enrich shape the experience. Disney Imagineers placed the air conditioning ducts above the front of the wooden platform so they would blow back across the installation ship. This flowing breeze augments the visuals, sounds, and gameplay, rendering the act of sailing on a ship at sea that little bit more convincing. A matrix of such details coheres into a fleshed out and

immersive experience. But the real brilliance of *Pirates of the Caribbean* is not how it generates a narrative frame using its technology alone. The brilliance lies in how the design of its technology references hundreds of *other* narratives, constructing a rich frame of experience. *Pirates of the Caribbean* works so well not only according to how it “tells the story by every means possible” but according to how it uses other stories to flesh out its own. It works because it is *transnarrative*, drawing upon familiar experiences from films, the pirate adventure genre, of course, but also videogames as well, using the tried and true, point and shoot mechanic. Its transnarrative reaches across decades: we play the contemporary game, based on 1990s films, which were remediated from 1970s comics, and so on. Transnarratives spread across the mediascape when Spiderman spreads his web over the internet, in cosplay conventions, fan fiction, games, films, toys, cereal box, tattoos, clothing, etc. Transnarratives spread across engagement models: the commercial success of *Pokémon* for the Game Boy led to comic books and anime series. Unlike many videogame-based films or shows only loosely based on the original work, like Hanna-Barbera’s cartoon *Pac-Man*, the *Pokémon* cartoon represented the rules of the game accurately. The battle mechanics and progression of the show was close enough to the game so that by watching it viewers learned successful strategies to use in the game.<sup>14</sup> Transnarratives consolidate media events, artifacts, and practices across time, space, and modes of engagement. They have a totalizing effect in the sense that they not only ignore the different qualities of different mediums, but also elide the spaces between mediums, in Higgins’s sense. Intermedia games crack that space back open.



Figure 4-5 *Trash This City* physically materializes a *SimCity*-like model to be stomped by gallery-goers.

The complicit formal avant-garde goes where transnarratives can't go, helping us step into the negative space of media. Nirmala Shome's *Trash This City* (2007) meticulously reconstructed by hand the virtual buildings of *SimCity*. The cardboard miniatures nearly covered the floor of All of the Above Gallery in Melbourne. During the day visitors moved buildings around, tagged them with markers, and strolled through them... and that night they stomped the little city to pieces. The original game *SimCity* allowed players to grow and destroy garden-plot cities with tornados, fires, and aliens. *SimCity* fashioned its own story as a neat and manageable urban lifecycle: 1) start a city; 2) explore the solution space of the city; 3) destroy the city. *Trash This City* transliterates this highly abstracted idea out of the videogame to awkwardly feel it out beneath our feet. It dislocated its active elements from the machine and made them physical. It shifted the pleasure from a symbolic

mode into a tangible mode. Instead of clicking menus, players savored the uneven crunch of cardboard beneath their own feet. One visitor said it was like fracturing computer screens. The trope of razing a model city is presented to us constantly in our media from the tower of Babel allegory, to the Monty Python foot, post-WWII Japanese movies, and the *Rampage* arcade game remediating those movies. *Trash This City* is a gesture displaced from its original medium of videogames and from the general transnarrative from which it arises. It even recalls the childhood game of stacking block with the goal of knocking them down again. Because this trope was dislocated from the mediascape from which it grew, it is as if players could finally step on the trope itself, pinning it under their shoes. The physicality of this destructible model is situated in-between all these other versions. It was knocked out of any one of these particular categories and into the negative space between them.

How can one describe the entire formal landscape of the videogame medium? Recalling the end of the radical formal chapter, we can think of every action every videogame allows us to do as a long spreadsheet of verbs: attack, defend, jump, select, etc. The radical formal works of Jodi, Oliver, and Minter give us an exaggerated, extreme sense of these conventions. However, the complicit formal avant-garde is more hybrid and in-between. What experience lies *between* defend and attack? What is *between* managing resources and leveling up? These are in-game verbs, what of out-of-game verbs? What is *between* a thumb swivel and a thumb tap, or a mouse click? What is *between* rapidly tapping a key and just holding it down? If we connected all of the existing conventions of videogames into a big shape, what would it look like? Envision a rhizome, matrix, or lattice of associations. Picture “attack” as an enormous planet-like node that dominates the spiderweb space. From “attack” hundreds (thousands?) of smaller nodes: “shoot,” “punch,” “eat,” and so

on link up like an internet relay hub. What would that towering structure of verbs look like as a whole? What is its potential shape and size? On a large scale, the entire videogame medium constitutes a massive, lumbering cluster of mechanics, genres, technologies, and associations. Nearby are other colossal clusters that comprise the mediums of film, comics, video, and so on. These intersect, dissolve into in parts, and link up in other areas, with videogames. They get entangled with games in so many places. This expanded view is conducive to complicit formal experimentation, namely that of *intermedia*, while the close-up view inside a single medium, is conducive to radical formal investigations. By skating across the gaps and divides, complicit formalism allows us to get a better sense of where videogames break down as a medium and become something else. These two perspectives of radical and complicit, suggest a set of complementary discoveries and practices. However, since this complicit formal view is more expansive than the radical formal view, it allows many more streams of technoculture into its gameplay.

## Affordance Mining

The little paper buildings in Shome's *Trash This City* are asking to be stepped on. Walking by, you kind of want to crush them, but why? The cityscape is not neatly constructed, but is a warped and awkward, wobbly and precarious, little construction. Broad marker strokes, cheap construction paper and fuzzy green felt belie a transiency. The piece doesn't feel like a meticulous miniature that took weeks to construct, but a crappy construction slapped together that is about to fall apart. Shome uses cheapness and contingency as an *affordance*, a positive and actionable thing that seems to stick out of the experience. Shome artfully invites the viewer into playful action. An affordance is a property that seems to call out from a technology to the person nearby it or handling it. A doorknob looks like it wants to

be turned and pulled. The natural habitat of a game controller seems to be right there in our hands—its affordances of size, shape, sticks, and buttons, sends our fingers fiddling. A hammer wants you to grab it and little strike protrusions. Physical affordances are virtualized in the computer. We look through “windows,” place stuff in “folders,” press buttons, and scuttle mice around. Donald Norman in *The Design of Everyday Things* popularized “affordance” in this sense. Norman’s thesis is that technology should be designed to be transparent and intuitive for users, by presenting strong and clear affordances.

Norman appropriated “affordance” from perceptual psychologist J. J. Gibson to refer to the actionable properties between the world and an “actor,” in which he included animals and other living things. To Gibson, the sum of affordances comprises the nature of a relationship between actor-and-world. Affordances are inherent to nature: they do not have to be visible, known, or even “desirable”—for example the paw-size, scuttling gait, and smell of a mouse from a cat’s perspective makes them a provocative play-thing inviting an attack, while these same mouse attributes congeal into a gestalt of disgust for humans. Innumerable affordances have yet to be discovered between humans and the physical world, let alone between humans and technology. We do not nearly know all the affordances of even “everyday objects” like hot irons, stools, handguns, or toilet paper.<sup>15</sup>

I propose that looking for unrealized affordances in things, technological or otherwise, could be called *affordance mining*. Affordance mining is the process of researching and playing with a material or technology to determine its underutilized and actionable properties. These properties are leveraged to foster innovative forms of interaction between the actor and the technology. Affordance mining could also be considered a type of hacking. Rather than subverting a technology’s designed

intent by exploiting its weaknesses, the emphasis is on discovering and inventing new interaction mode with a technology. Affordance mining is a practical method of digging in the undiscovered space of intermedia by using *things* as a surprising guide. In formal terms, affordance mining is to focus on an object's materiality and our sensual experiences of it, and, from the increased awareness coming from these two supports, create new interaction models, and possibly, new conventions. The first step in affordance mining is to engage the object with an open, playful vision and a sense of full embodiment. It is to resist semiotic entrainment, and to exist with and play with the thing in a way that is *otherwise* to what is familiar. Handle the thing, sleep on it, roll it around, throw it in a pile of other things. What new types of interaction become visible, or playfully expedient, sensible?



Figure 4-6 In *Bishop's Game* the common computer keyboard is conceptually transformed into a clunky touchpad to poke and mash.

Why do we only *type* on the computer keyboard? What is this flat, long, and plastic thing? It's a bit greasy. Disgusting but interesting. What else could we do? How else could we touch input through it? The keyboard wants you to bang its

array of buttons against the table, stand on it, and rub your elbows all over its belly. *Mashboard Games* is a series of game prototypes I made in collaboration with Jeremy Rogers where we affordance mine the common computer keyboard. *Mashboard Games* is an attempt to discover some play-enabling properties of this thing that we are totally familiar with. We are so familiar in fact, that we no longer really see or feel it any longer, unless we're using a new computer, or a friend's. Through affordance mining, our usual mechanistic relationship to the keyboard can be reset and re-interpreted. It becomes a clunky touchpad, an instrument to be played, a site of a goofy protest. *Mashboard Games* are awkwardly liberating to play because players have to deprogram themselves and reinvigorate their relationship to the keyboard on more physically playful, body-friendly terms, and all in reactive, real-time. One prototype is the campy, gruesome *Bishop's Game*. The player holds down the spacebar with the heel of one hand, spreading their fingers apart over the keys. A deformed virtual hand appears onscreen, mimicking this formation. With their other hand, the player jabs the keyboard in a sequential pattern between the spread fingers.<sup>16</sup> For every keyboard poke a virtual knife breaks off a virtual key, and if they stab fast enough, they destroy the entire virtual keyboard. If they accidentally poke their own hand hard enough for the keyboard to register the press, a virtual knife gouges their on-screen hand.

Fluxus artist George Maciunas rigged ping pong rackets and jacked up tables in his play experiments. In a way, Maciunas invented affordance mining, sawing holes in rackets, gluing Styrofoam to them, and attaching cans and tubes. It is as if Maciunas was solving design problems that did not exist, fixing unbroken games. Even though the impulse was destructive, like grieving practice, the results were surprisingly generative. We can think of Maciunas as affordance mining this analog game hardware, tools, and household materials. Dormant reactive properties of the



equipment became apparent. Now the ball spins in a direction you did not expect. You must constantly recalibrate your physical intuition in real-time as you learn new facets of the popular game.

The effect that occurs in the artistic process of affordance mining is reflected in the player's playful engagement of games as well. Just as artists have to alienate themselves from the technology in order to allow new connections to pop out from the flat horizon of experience, so too does the player as she must unlearn some things in order to play it. Affordance mining, for artists and players alike, first alienates us from the hardware because it defies our years of conditioning, but the end result is the opposite of alienation. Through the new affordances presented to us, we re-familiarize ourselves and reestablish a more embodied relationship with the technology. Johanna Drucker proposes:

the idea of *refamiliarization* as an associative reading that resituates images within networks and scenes of knowledge. The idea is proposed as a task of recovery, rather than alienation, and suggests a line between the shock-effect approach of exposure, predicated on a belief in a false surface to be unmasked, and the totalized concepts of simulacral virtuality that forecloses lived experience.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to complicit formalism, Drucker sees refamiliarization as a way to move forward in understanding contemporary art. Affordance mining is a strategy to enable defamiliarization and varied kinds of refamiliarization. There's the alienation in the immediate task of trying to play a videogame using the computer keyboard as a touchpad, for example. However, this jarring apart of experience allows us to drift along the "thing's" functional surface and reorient ourselves to it, form alternate

dimensions in our relationship to it. Players, who risk their relationship with game technologies through cycles of familiarization-alienation-refamiliarization in videogame art, recapitulate the process that the artists used in creating these works. To play them is to become a game artist. It is to be open to the shifting nature of what it means to play games and make games.

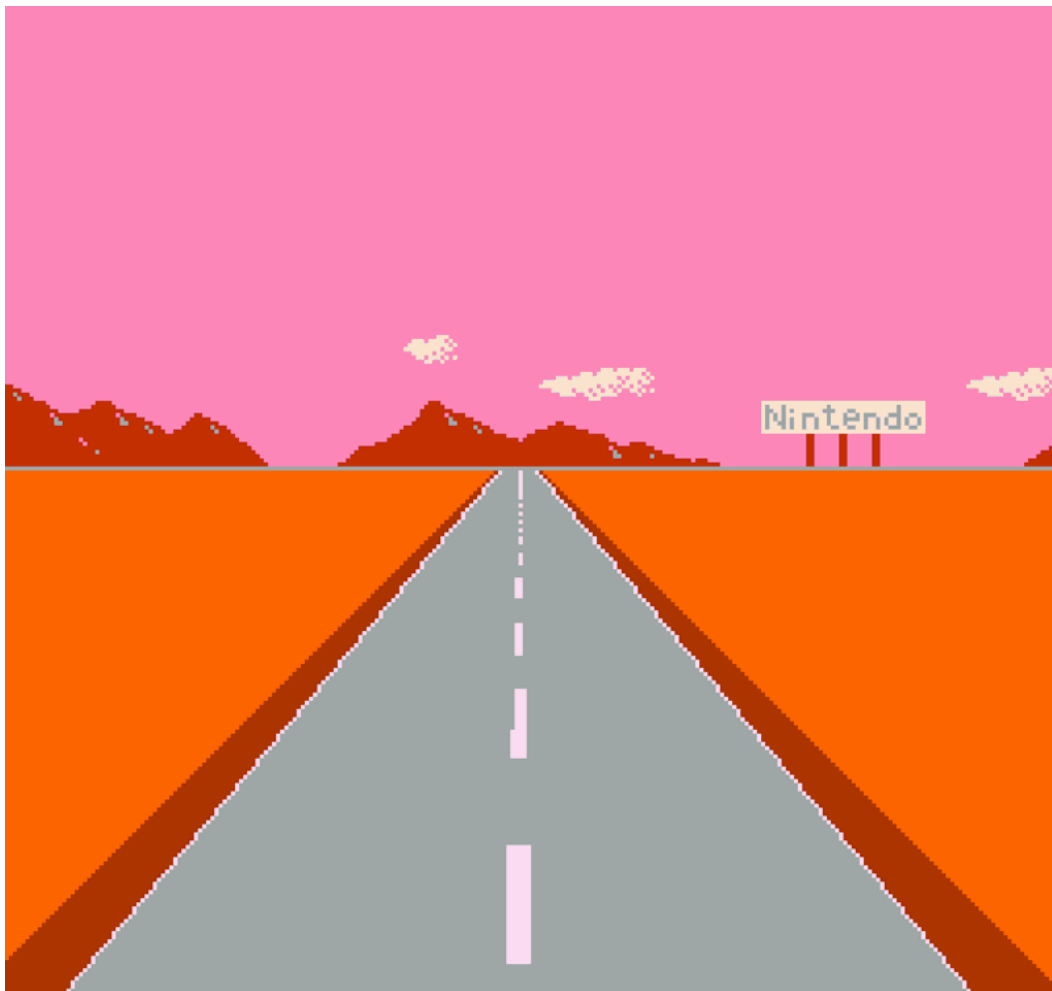


Figure 4-7 The videogame *F1 Racer Mod* (*Japanese Driving Game*) presents a pretty and endless highway, luring players to data-bend and hack games.

Cory Arcangel's most famous work is *Super Mario Clouds* (2002) in which the graphical data of Mario and all the objects of his world sit in the chip waiting for

cues that will never come. White clouds drifting over a bright blue sky lazily occupy the projector screen. Arcangel left the graphic chip of an NES *Super Mario Bros.* cartridge intact and reburned the code chip to only call upon the clouds to scroll slowly from right to left. Arcangel has actually created a series of Nintendo game cartridge hacks, like *F1 Racer Mod (Japanese Driving Game)* (2004), in which all the player can do is gaze at an endless highway scroll down. A Nintendo billboard waits, ever-present on the horizon.

Like *Super Mario Clouds*, *F1 Racer Mod* is not just the projection, but the “artwork” includes the carved up cartridge itself, the exhibition events of the work, and most importantly, Arcangel’s website descriptions of the work, instructions on how to repeat the process, and alluring photos treating Nintendo cartridges as playfully as Lego pieces. Arcangel explains that there are two chips inside a Nintendo cartridge, one with audiovisual information, and the other with gameplay information. All this procedural information is integral to the artwork itself. Arcangel renders the process fascinating, contagious, and easy to reproduce:

The Nintendo can only display graphics in 8 pixel by 8 pixel squares, and can only hold 8k of graphics in total therefore [...] These two hardware limitations defined the aesthetic of most early 80’s video games on the Nintendo, and making “art” for this system is a study of these limitations.<sup>18</sup>

The bonus of playing with early game systems in this way is their intimate access to the display mechanism of the television. The NES draws graphics to the television when the scan line is jumping from the last line on the bottom back to the top. The clouds do not really move, but are repositioned by the assembly code during this period when the electron beam is jumping. Negotiation with technology at this level

is deeply appealing, “I like these systems not cause of nostalgia, but because they are cheap and easy to work. Also they are the perfect middle ground between analog and digital video.”<sup>19</sup> This takes the game imagery back to their cultural, nostalgic, and technological roots, so that players can materially grasp these hybrid features.

Arcangel’s meta-playing of Miyamoto’s games are a hat tip to Robert Rauschenberg, who unworked a De Kooning in *Erased De Kooning* (1953). Rauschenberg asked Willem De Kooning if he could erase one of his drawings in order to make a new “collaborative” work from it. Although Rauschenberg spent hours carefully rubbing out the pencil lines palimpsest remained as a ghostly afterimage. Attempting to erase the act of drawing increased its prominence as a process. Because it is unevenly faded the details draw in our attention, attenuating it, asking for us to look more intently. Arcangel erases Miyamoto’s work, leaving a palimpsest of blips and a drained sense of worldliness. Our desire is left swimming in place as we re-approach Miyamoto’s work from an ethereal perspective. Solace is found digging in the process that Arcangel developed to create these works. We find the game that Arcangel has crafted is when we scratch back at the material sources of Nintendo nostalgia from new, illuminating angles.



Figure 4-8 *The 8-Bit Construction Set* is a vinyl record whose audio, if recorded onto a cassette, is readable as computer code in an Atari or Commodore console.

The first project that eventually led to these cartridge hacks was *The 8-Bit Construction Set* (1998-2000), a vinyl record produced by Beige Records (a record label cofounded by Arcangel, which shares credit of all his work). On one side of the record was chiptune music inspired by the limitations and affordances of 8-bit audio music of these third generation systems. On the other side of the record was audio data (computer code in sonic form) that could be played and recorded onto a cassette, which would actually boot into an Atari or Commodore 64 console. Once

uploaded, the same music from the other side of the record now would be generated live by system hardware. *The 8-Bit Construction Set* was to “redefine the very limits of what one can put on a slab of wax” since it was “half dj battle record/half concept album.” The record was entirely programmed in 6502 assembly language, a notoriously tedious task among programmers. The most lyrical Arcangel piece is *I Shot Andy Warhol*, which features the NES game, *Hogan’s Alley*, replacing villains with Colonel Sanders, Flavor Flav, Pope John Paul II, and Andy Warhol. Marrying technical skill, formal experimentation, and humor is Arcangel’s favorite recipe:

And then you undercut the seriousness or utility of the practice by introducing some sort of absurd version of the typical way of doing things. And you do this in two ways, which are, interestingly, opposite. You either introduce a ridiculously enormous and therefore pointless amount of work into it, or you reduce the work by using automation, or defaults, or outsourcing.<sup>20</sup>

Because Arcangel infuses contrasting perspectives and tactics in his work, he’s one of the most renowned contemporary game artists, featured in the Whitney Biennial, the Guggenheim, MoMA and Eyebeam in New York. Arcangel credits the formation of his practice to the hobby scene and many online communities, such as AtariAge.com, where modding and hacking spawns from a love of experimenting with videogames, both in terms of their hardware technology and their cultural conventions.

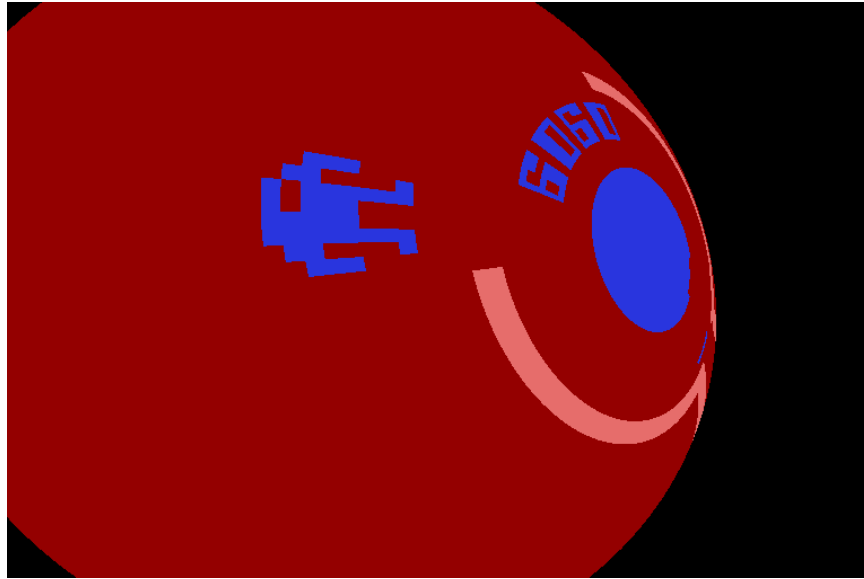


Figure 4-9 *jit.atari2600* enables “data-bending” of Atari ROMs, warping the code and the imagery it produces.

Beyond hardware, the software extracted from these old cartridges and machines is also a rich material for affordance mining. Emulators on PCs and Macs run the ROM software of these old games, once only playable on the original Atari or Nintendo consoles. Artists are taking the game code beyond the original hardware limitations. As opposed to soldering and circuit-bending, this is “data-bending” according to Kyle Buza. Buza coded *jit.atari2600*, which emulates the execution of the Atari 2600 game console within Max, an open development environment. Upon this new layer of malleability, Buza renders old 2D games as if they were 3D, distorting their gamespace through spherical and cylindrical mirroring. Data-bending these old games can highlight the limitations of the hardware such as Stella, the Atari 2600’s graphic synchronizer. The digital simulation of Stella can be bent in ways that the chip, in its material form, cannot be bent, such as warping the screen output into wobbly spherical or cylindrical shapes. These results sensually contrast with the Atari games in our memory, and we feel the difference intuitively. This creative practice is complementary to a more critical

approach. For example, see the study by Montfort and Bogost about the influence the videogame hardware had on the design of the software in *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*.<sup>21</sup>

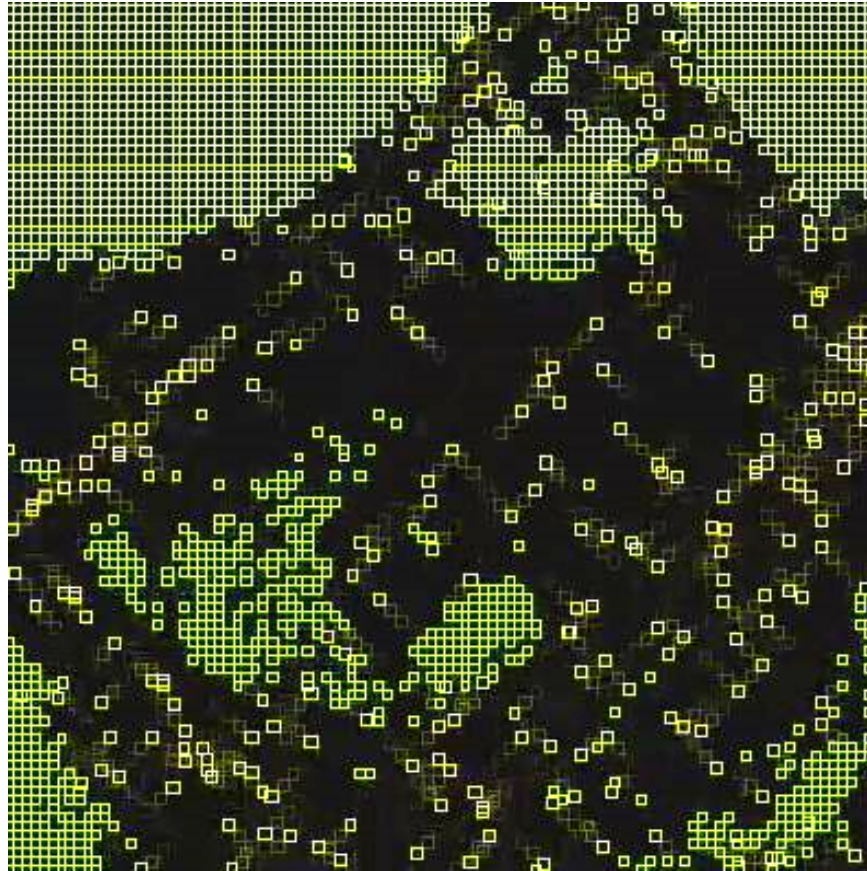


Figure 4-10 A student example of *Game Mod* remixing a Processing version of *Breakout* in a non-goal oriented way.

*Game Mod* (2007) was a workshop ran by Steph Thirion at ELISAVA, a design school in Barcelona, for non-programmers to play with game code in a hands-on way. At the beginning of the workshop, Thirion briefly presented the concept of game modding with works like *Untitled Game*, discussed in the radical formal chapter. Next he demoed a *Breakout* game he coded in Processing for participants to remix. He showed them how to open the game code in the Processing IDE, and



encouraged them to begin playing with the code on an open and self-directed way. According to Steph, “That’s it, that’s all I showed. They found out how to run and stop it, and after five minutes most were already modding its graphics and dynamics.” He answered few programming questions in any detail and pointed participants to the very well documented Processing references online, “so they would either creatively look for an alternative solution, or find out they could easily get the answers by themselves.” The objective of the workshop was not to teach programming, but to treat code like a material that could be squeezed and manipulated. This contrasts starkly with the dominant approach to programming as a container and vehicle of predetermined ideas. *Game Mod* reclaims videogame code as a formal thing on its own, as something that has a character, certain resistances and flexibilities that can be formally appreciated. Because these were design students without programming experience (none of them had even heard of Processing before), they were able to avoid the assumption that coding is a highly structured process ordered only by logic. They could learn by praxis, where it was not only deemed acceptable, but necessary, to fiddle with the inside of videogames as if they were a material to affordance mine, squeezing procedures through the IDE as you would squeeze mud or sand through our fingers. Categories of “correct” and “incorrect” were ignored because “their lack of knowledge of the tool was more a creativity boost than it was a limitation.” Design-oriented gamespace was transformed into a playful zone of codespace. To play *Game Mod* was to program it, and to program it was to play it. Perhaps *Game Mod* is a flare into some bright future where the average person in technoculture can approach and handle software.

Affordance mining can be used to resist how well we entrain ourselves to technology, conforming our behavior to the easiest and most obvious affordances. This extends from how we tend to think about code, to how we tend to think about

gameplay. In *Gamer Theory*, Wark quotes K-Punk: “What do we look like from gamespace?”<sup>22</sup> They assume that player actions appear vital, spontaneous, and unpredictable from the perspective of gamespace. Monkey confuses robot. We appear like Futurist action-collages of joystick up-thrusts, wiggly downward motions, staccato mouse clicks, and improvisational button presses. But Wark has it backwards. We are not chaotic or even interesting from the perspective of gamespace. We become ideal videogame subjects, repeating the patterns the solution space affords best. We hit the same keys on the keyboard in statistically congruent patterns. We only type upon the buttons of the computer keyboards, for example, nothing else.

Affordance mining can be extended beyond human, cultural readings. It is generally accepted by animal behaviorists that animals do indeed “play.” Like Dissanayake’s far-reaching claims about the centrality of art to culture, Gordon Burghardt sees play as central in building social relationships in animals, “play may have been involved in the origin or elaboration of parental behavior.”<sup>23</sup> Birds fiddle with and fuss with their offspring, trying this or that with their beaks, talons, breasts, and wings. This behavior “isn’t energetically costly,” but generates new “adaptive repertoires” such as grooming tricks, or communication modules that may later advantage courtship. Perhaps this animal behavior could be considered analogous to affordance mining. They experiment with the matrix of potential bonds between their own body and mind, one another’s bodies, and elements of their immediate environment, such as twigs, grubs, or stones.

When we speak of affordance mining, although a Darwinian explanation is plausible, a non-adaptive justification as to why creatures, including ourselves, affordance mine elements of their world, can come from the avant-garde. Being

open to existential questions, to unwork our rituals of being with technology, is a reason in itself. It is not just to ensure survival, or to survive better, but to survive otherwise, to exist otherwise. That is justification enough.

## **Animating the Dead**

Affordance mining may start with the selection of a *material* object and then move on to ask how we can recalibrate our sensual relation to it. This recalibration may produce novel ways to play with the object. It reanimates the technology and knocks our rituals of blind routine off course. The order of this process can be reversed. A cultural *convention*, a common event or meaning, can be extracted from its original context. By extracting it we can sense it in new ways and *arrive* at new appreciation of its material basis and its cultural *quirks*. This section studies this reverse process, reanimating questions of our cultural logic in videogames as much as our sensuality and the material technology.

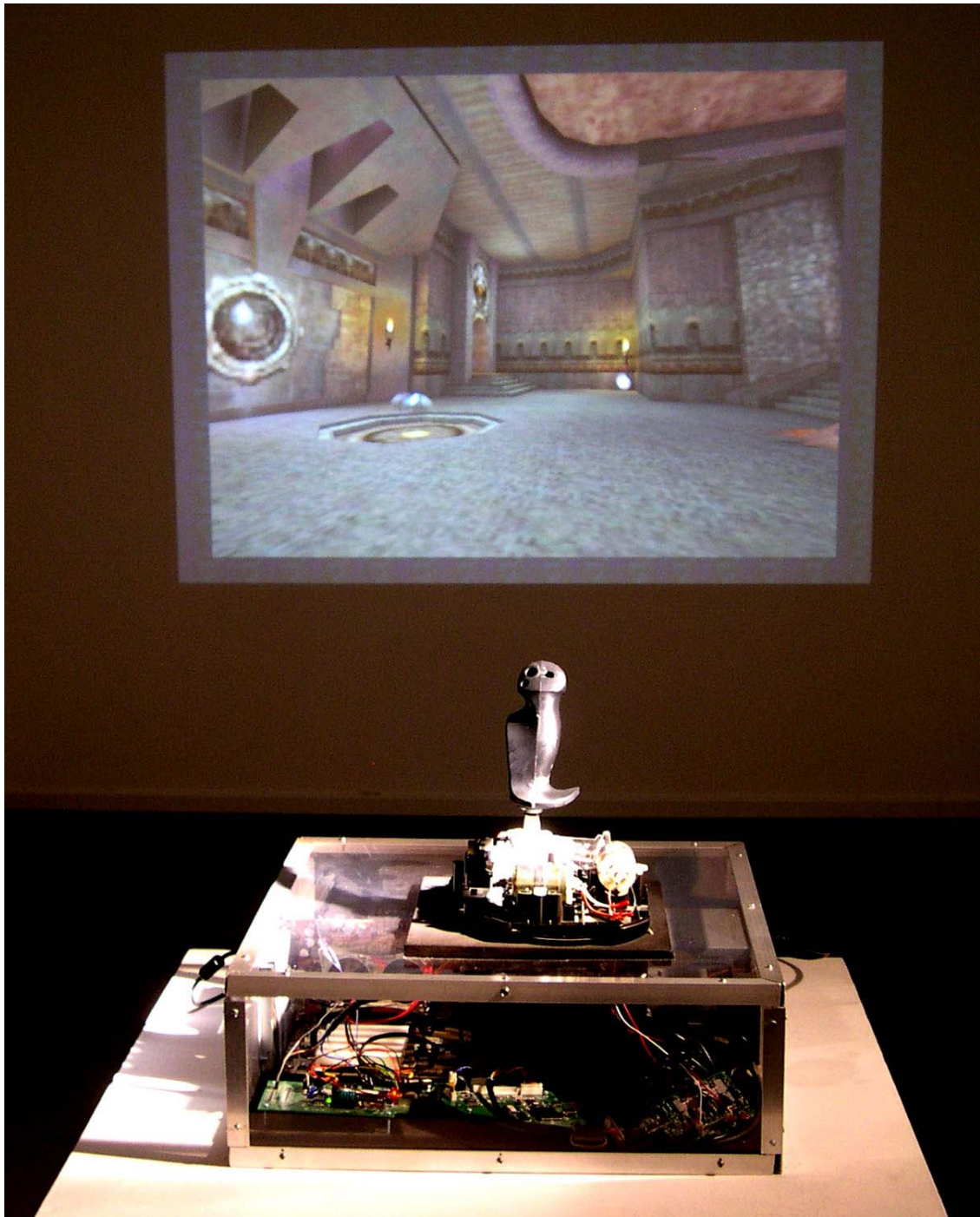


Figure 4-11 Players grip onto the *nOtbOt* joystick as it jerks around by itself, imitating the frantic twitchiness of players as they normally manipulate joysticks in combat.

In *nOtbOt* (2007) is a self-playing game that manipulates its own controller, which jiggles erratically by artificial intelligence. The joystick thrashes in response to

a bot's decisions rampaging through a stock *Quake III* level. Julian Oliver notes: "My first impression of *nOtbOt* was of a haunting: an AI that would take no more, fighting back at the input device in an urgent attempt to disenfranchise itself from a history of bondage."<sup>24</sup> Walter Langelaar, the artist of *nOtbOt*, is conversant with avant-garde approaches to technology, curating the 2008 DADAMACHINIMA show at PLANETART. *nOtbOt* takes a familiar cultural unit, the cliché criticism of phallogentrism in popular games, and transliterates it into a novel form for us to reconsider both sensually and comically. Viewers who attempt to become players of *nOtbOt* literally grab hold of the "Wingman Force" joystick, but figuratively, they grapple with the cliché itself with renewed intensity. Like a mechanical bull, the joystick's force bucks and rears, overriding much input. While gripping a controller yanking her arms about, the player feels servomotors caricature her usual manipulations back in an exaggerated way. The contained spectacle of *nOtbOt* renders the normal into absurdity quite effectively. In normal conditions, the bodies of players can become mechanized as their virtual bodies become more fantastic, attractive, and reactive. The pain of repeated button mashing is okay because we feel so empowered. Sony's EyeToy and Nintendo's Wii may feel Fluxus-like for several minutes, but atrophy can set into even the most action-oriented quest, as we learn how to exert the most efficient and minimal mechanical effort to cause a sword slash or double jump. With *nOtbOt*, however, the hyperactive player trying to control the bulling joystick ostensibly becomes her own griever, becoming more theatrical and open, the more desperately she tries to close up the procedural loop of control.



Figure 4-12 *Untitled (Death Animation)* extracts the moment of death out of videogames and presents it to us in an extracted, theatrical, and molasses-slow form.

*Untitled (Death Animation)* is a slow-motion, live-action performance of death animations taken from videogames. Lasting two hours, ten performers in medieval, space, and fantasy costumes roll around on the floor. Throbbing muscles hold up sluggishly contorting heads and quivering appendages aloft. Binaural electronic beats saturate the space, suspending meditative thought and drowning out conversations that would normally arise at such performances. The creator of *Untitled*, Brody Condon, has an art background, earning an MFA in Visual Arts from the University of California, which is important as this has established a range of historical influences for Condon. For *Untitled (Death Animation)* Condon was inspired by process artist, Bruce Nauman, and his *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* (1973). Nauman told two actors to lie on a concrete floor and imagine that they were sinking into it or that it was rising and enveloping them. The video performance is disturbing as the actors convulsively choke, contort, and act out their molecules becoming lodged into the concrete. In *Untitled (Death Animation)* the short

but spectacular moment of death is extracted from games and can be inspected in isolation and at length. Visitors oscillate between memories of gameplay and the liveliness of theatrical spectatorship. The invigorated duration of the live-action process emphasizes the physical presence, the undeniable life of the actors, and thus of the milling onlookers. Whether it was the old *Space Invaders* or in the latest *Advance Wars* memories of the flickering deaths we have experienced in videogames come into alignment and focus. In normal games, death marks the instant players are kicked out of the game in procedural failure. But death is also a spectacular reward for trying and a momentary reprieve. With the rag-doll physics of the Havok engine, the player is titillated to watch her avatar ricocheting off walls, or contorting as it absorbs a dozen bullets in a shooter game. *Untitled (Death Animation)* could be said to re-physicalize these digitally ephemeral and fantastically exploding bodies, showing, by contrast, just how virtual they have become in games.





Figure 4-13 The big ball controllers in *SweetPads* require a counter-intuitive and sensitive touch to direct movement and use weaponry properly.

*SweetPads* (2004) is a game mod that uses a sensual effect similar to the death animations discussed previously, but applies it to the aggressive act in games rather than the death act. The game is a four-player installation running a normal version of *Quake 3 Arena*, but with bowling ball sized controllers instead of mice, keyboards, or joysticks. In order to rain bullets upon opponents, players cannot just button mash, or spin the ball, but have to “use tenderness” and a “slow, gentle touch to kill” to quote the artist, France Cadet.<sup>25</sup> Players must delicately caress the dome’s surface to motivate their avatar down hallways. If they manage a sufficiently slow gesture down the right side of the pad, for example, the avatar rotates to the right by degrees. Rhythmically pressing the dome makes the avatar shoot, but tap too quickly and nothing happens. Cadet has run several robotics courses for years,



teaching in the Fine-Arts School of Aix-en-Provence, France. Interested in the “artificialization of life” she generatively conflates, behaviors of robots, animals, and humans—showing how humans are increasingly mechanizing themselves, even as we anthropomorphize machines. Rewarding a reticent input *SweetPads* is similar to *Untitled (Death Animations)*. The latter renders virtual death physical, whereas *SweetPads* shows how usual input is already virtual, or, at least how it is usually automated. Quick and efficient clicking in normal games brings the concomitant pleasure of deftly dispatching enemies while exerting mastery, but *SweetPads* separates the physical exertion from its usual effect of instant game action. Supple, yet frustrating, moments supplant the expected moment of mastery and dominance. It creates a gulf between cause and effect in which a state of fluxus can form, and you laterally drift in the slowed flow.

## Conflict as Art

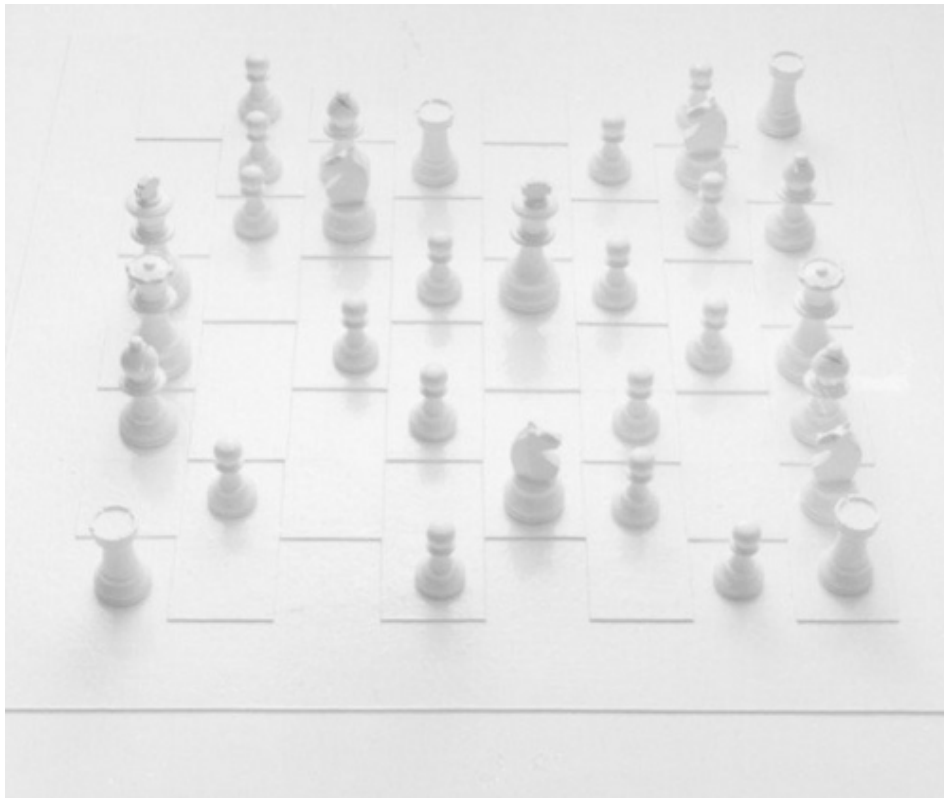


Figure 4-14 Not just a visual or conceptual work, gallery-goers are encouraged to playfully figure out ways to actually play Yoko Ono's *Play it With Trust / White Chess Set*.

In Yoko Ono's *Play it With Trust / White Chess Set* (1966) all of the game pieces and chessboard squares are white. Ono, a Fluxus artist, was inspired by the Cold War climate of suspicion and paranoia. Ono said you have to "play it with trust." A photographic negative of polarizing political angst, *White Chess Set* attempts to conduct the audience past categorical thinking. It is anti-binary by design. In most games one side's victory only comes at the expense of another side's defeat, a zero-sum logic that is formally unraveled. In *White Chess* the usual burden of play is refocused reflexively on all the things we usually take for granted. It is only from a lack of imagination on the part of the players that *White Chess* appears unplayable.

Like *SweetPads*, *White Chess* is only as broken as each player interprets it to be. When adventurous gallery-goers accept the challenge of *White Chess*, a torrent of questions ensues: Is this my piece or yours? Am I playing with you or against you? If this is co-op mode, how does it function in chess? Due to the challenge of its formal openness, the game forces players to cooperatively construct new rules of engagement as they struggle to keep the game playable.

The next chapter examines the complicit *political* avant-garde, which attempts to involve masses of people in playing reality as a rewritable game. For the complicit *political* avant-garde, the focus tends to be on the social reality in which thousands of players live their everyday lives. In contrast, the complicit *formal* avant-garde seems to localize its pressure in specific, special places, such as a gallery space. It also tends to focus the audience's energy on an individual (or a small number of individuals), the spectacular artist or performer. This strategy makes sense as the complicit formal avant-garde is a postmodern outgrowth of Modern or formal art, which presented artists as lone visionary heroes. This vision is transformed into one of personal sacrifice on the part of some complicit formal artists. For example, Yoko Ono allowed audiences to cut the clothes off of her in *Cut Piece*, first performed in 1964. Chris Burden placed his safety in audiences' hands, as well as non-audiences, perhaps in a pathological way. He climbed into a duffel bag and was thrown onto the highway. He let himself be shot by rifle in a gallery in a 1971 piece called *Shoot*—it was supposed to only graze him but it tore through his shoulder. The formal complicity of Andy Warhol, both with his inclusive aesthetics of popular entertainment and with his role perpetuating the Modern myth of artist as visionary rebel hero, would include him within this group as well.



Figure 4-15 Self-sacrificial artist, Wafaa Bilal, ducks from a remote-controlled paintball gun in a gallery space in which he lived during *Domestic Tension*.

In *Domestic Tension* Iraqi-American Wafaa Bilal locked himself in a gallery for a month to be bombarded with paintballs from a webcam-mounted gun operated by internet users. Bilal was to give a face to the Iraq war. By inviting the players to treat him as a target in a videogame, he nurtured empathy, but also incited aggression. The site got 80 million hits. 60,000 paintballs were fired. Bilal suffered welts, bruises, and occasional bleeding. For Bilal, the worst part was not the physical pain, but the droning anxiety of not knowing when he would get sniped again. The sonic and physical assault, got under his skin immediately, especially as he tried to sleep. Bilal had an emotional breakdown several times, visibly sobbing as the internet kept shooting him. He wore goggles to protect his eyes and increasingly hid behind a transparent shield he had set up to protect his head at night. Bilal has been in the U.S. since 1992 when he was granted asylum. His siblings and parents remain in Iraq. His 21-year-old brother was killed in 2005 in Najaf by a missile fired from an

American drone and two months later his father died. Afterwards, he saw an ABC interview of a soldier sitting at a computer in Colorado remote-controlling a drone over Iraq and launching missiles. Critics dismiss the piece as it says more about the nature of the internet than war. But didn't *Domestic Tension* successfully give a body, face and a degree of participation, to some popular arguments that usually lack each of these? The work gives flesh and specificity to abstract details we hear about the consequences of the war, for example, that Iraqis no longer are safe or feel safe in their homes. Because the work blends the virtual and the material, it encouraged players to sensually and seriously consider the interplay between war and the videogame technologies and analogies used to execute it and to describe it.

A chat room on the website allowed Bilal to engage his shooters and allow players to talk to each other. He blended a comfort zone with a conflict zone, aesthetic pleasure with aesthetic pain. Bridges were extended internationally as people from 130 countries shot at him and texted each other in the chat room. He did not want to “hit people hard with a message” but create a middle ground whereby open-ended encounters could occur. However, the dialogue flowing through the chat room found no middle ground. Two competing goals emerged from the multitude of online players: to punish or protect Bilal. Coders authored Java scripts to make the gun aim and fire automatically, and others thwarted strikes by well-timing a nudge. By the end of the piece, protectors stayed online to form a persistent “virtual human shield.” Where *Domestic Tension* fails the artist’s vision is its most interesting feature. As intermedia, it flows between videogame, postmodern warfare, internet culture, and performance. There was no middle ground or amenable conversation, like Bilal intended. It was a contest that drew a line between those who would shoot him and those who would not. Even as a *videogame* or a *video* piece it was divided as people tended to focus on watching Bilal or mastering the

gun apparatus. Delaying the trigger by seconds, minutes, or even hours might decrease the binary nature of the piece, or at least add another dimension of reflexivity and slippage: a player would aim, shoot, and return later to see her action unfold from a temporally detached perspective, similar to how *SweetPads* slows down the act of shooting, rendering it stumblingly supple and reflexive.

### **Normal Players are Already Cyborgs**

The Greek root for “cybernetics” is steersman, and Katherine Hayles proposes this, “aptly describes the cybernetic man-machine: light on its feet, sensitive to change, a being that both creates flow and knows how to go with the flow.” Consciousness is distributed across a network that is aware, and in control, of its myriad extensions. The brain and the CPU, the soft skin and the titanium carapace, the retina and the circuit, mesh into one unit. This paradigm is represented in popular media, as in the Borg of *Star Trek*. The cyborg exists in reality: prosthetic limbs and organs, gene therapy, pharmaceuticals, etc. The cyborg is a mythical, literary, and cultural figure, but also a figure of scientific practice, which centers the cyborg at a hub of crossroads:

Were the cyborg only a product of discourse, it could perhaps be relegated to science fiction, of interest to SF aficionados but not of vital concern to the culture. Were it only a technological practice, it could be confined to such technical fields as bionics, medical prostheses, and virtual reality. Manifesting itself as both technological object and discursive formation, it partakes of the power of the imagination as well as of the actuality of technology.<sup>26</sup>

The term “cyborg” straddles disciplines, making it a versatile and productive model for complicit formal avant-garde practice. The cyborg figure is centered on meshing controls between body, technology, culture, and the planet to allow self-determining hybrid unities to form and mutate.

To imagine the “human” components of a cyborg trying to affordance mining the technology she is already integrated with, doesn’t make much sense. It is like trying to imagine a Borg drone hacking into his own hybrid brain. This is because we tend to think of the cyborg as a complete synthesis, rather than as an assemblage that is always either falling apart or together. Cyborgs seek flow and they foster flow. But the science fiction gets interesting, of course, when things go awry in this scenario. This is also where avant-garde artists come in. Affordance mining artists probes the potential fields of convergence between themselves and technology, working intuitively and by trial and error. They are subtle cyborgs, looking for new silly connections between people and technology. They are grotesque cyborgs, over-working the connections into a monstrous, teetering contraption.

The normal videogame-player loop is already a potent cyborg archetype—without any intervention or further invention by avant-garde artists. Even in familiar, mundane gameplay, the interaction of player and videogame suggests the cybernetic hybrid. As Sherry Turkle notes videogames evoke infinity and offer a glimpse of perfection, if we can couple tightly enough with the technology.<sup>27</sup> Gameplay, as it is developing according to the popular formulas of flow, is designed to process just a bit beyond our abilities. Players continually reach, growing into the game feeling as if they could play well enough they may emerge from the other side of gamespace. Scott Bukatman calls this condition “terminal identity” where videogames “represent the most complete symbiosis generally available between

human and computer—a fusion of spaces, goals, options, and perspectives.”<sup>28</sup> The key is that players always feel if they could just make it over the next hill, just make it another round, just vanquish the next enemy, they will have made it—and, of course, after this hill there is always another that pulls just as hard as the previous. The player-game symbiosis is not static, but a gravitational field that demands ever-greater warping to gain better connectivity, more out of time, more energy flowing in the system.

William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace” after visiting an arcade of bug-eyed kids wobbling joysticks through the “consensual hallucination” of *Space Invaders*, *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*. Gibson repeats this in *Neuromancer*, “The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games.”<sup>29</sup> Gibson’s cyberspace overwrites the human body with the machine body, just like many of our videogames. What is “bullet-time” if not a reward for accepting our digital body as a growing surrogate, slowly outperforming our material body? In cyberpunk novels and videogames, material disembodiment is compensated by an electronic and symbolic embodiment. The “pain” of what is lost is supposedly more than reciprocated by what is gained. The concept of growth-through-trauma might have been familiar to the Greeks, but was articulated in these terms by Freud in *The Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). It was expanded upon by Walter Benjamin as a method of Leftist critique, and later picked up by Marshal McLuhan and is still applied in art and media theory today as Hal Foster channels McLuhan: “Technology is both an excessive stimulus, a shock to the body, *and* a protective shield against such stimulus-shock, with the stimulus converted into the shield (which then invites more stimulus, and so on).”<sup>30</sup> Complicit formal artists *accelerate* this reciprocation and growth, this path toward symbiosis, toward uncanny, comically exaggerated, and grotesque results.





Figure 4-16 Stelarc, a cyborg artist, harnesses his body's materiality as an extension of new media technology, rendering his body, unintentionally and wondrously, apelike.

Stelarc is a well-known performance and cyborg artist who explores the human body as if he were mining the affordances of a technology. In his piece, *Ping Body/Proto-parasite* (1995), an audience in Paris touched screen icons to trigger electrode-rigged muscles on the left side of Stelarc's body (in a distant Luxembourg) to flex and release. Stelarc went further and "made the body a video switcher and mixer," a human graphics card, and relayed the processed information back to Paris for projection. He is known for odd statements such as: "We fear we have always

been zombies..."<sup>31</sup> His chief operating agenda is to reveal how "Information is the prosthesis that holds up the obsolete body."<sup>32</sup> Stelarc wishes to give information total control over the organic dimension of human life. A reporter describes one of Stelarc's performances, "FLABBY, balding and naked, a middle-aged man convulses as 30 volts pulse through skin and bone, stimulating his nerve endings and producing an involuntary dance. It looks like torture [...]"<sup>33</sup> Watching a Stelarc performance gives some a sense of his separation from technology rather than his integration. Perhaps Stelarc appears like a monstrous videogame player from some dystopian future. But like science fiction, technological art invokes the future to dig into the present. Stelarc is not only satirical of the videogame player of the future, he is satirical of the videogame player of today. He grafts technology into his body in literal fashion, as players do figuratively. The cell-cultivated ear he implanted into his left arm is a grotesque exaggerated version of the Nintendo Power Glove, Virtual Boy, or Wii Remote.



Figure 4-17 The *BioShock* player injects DNA-rewiring "plasmids" in her virtual arm which makes the mundane "cyborg" of the player-videogame-unit pale in comparison.

Cyborg fantasies are a recurring theme in videogames. Why? They are obviously not meant to make players feel like an apishly tech-tortured Stelarc. On the contrary, they are in place to make us comfortable with the actual the cybernetic loop of the player-videogame. Today's cyborg player combines the retina and the screen, the controller and the hand, the brain and the CPU. The fantastical and phantasmagoric in-game cybernetic relationship between the player's avatar and the future technology within the game narrative are pushed to extremes to make the actual cyborg sitting on the couch feel normal, by comparison. The avatar is a freak so we don't have to be. Swiveling a d-pad, and button mashing for hours on end at luminous flickering screens, seems normal and ordinary when it is compared to the spectacular in-game action of stabbing mutagen plasmids into your virtual wrists, discharging lightning from fingertips, or mind-controlling Big Daddy monsters in *BioShock*. The tight coupling between player and videogame appear banal by comparison. The cybernetic spectacle also covers up the fact that while players are given an inordinate amount of fictional, in-game power, this is to compensate for the dearth of power their muscles, senses, brains, and bodies actually wield in the cybernetic network of player-videogame.

### **What does a Cyborg Desire?**

Avant-garde practice gives us too much or too little, so we have to switch, reflect, deny, or adapt, all so that we may play otherwise. How can complicit formal practice incorporate more or less of the player's body than usual? How can the normal player-videogame cyborg become monstrous or mouse-like? Science fiction loves this subject. Consider the 1987 film *RoboCop*, in which, in order to save the life of a dying policeman, biotech makes him a cyborg. At first, RoboCop, the character,

is controlled completely by machine components. But while resting, Robocop has a nightmare that short-circuits his programming and he remembers who killed him. RoboCop painfully blends his immediate machine programming with his overarching goal of justice and personal vengeance. In a way, he works out shared custody of “himself” between his grey matter brain and his new CPU. Aren’t we all RoboCops when we first fire up any game? All gameplay is bumpy at first as we run around in circles shooting our foot. This initial phase of short-circuits and confusion may last only seconds for expert gamers before a flowing cybernetic state is reached. The conventional wisdom on game design is to move the player quickly through this introductory phase of interruptions. Hybrid formal videogames enable us to laterally drift in this initial get-to-know-myself (as newly fangled “player-videogame” cyborg) phase. In the process, we commiserate, mingle, and re-integrate with game technology in ways don’t reveal so much about our phantasmagoric cybernetic futures, but they do reveal a whole hell of a lot about our phantasmagoric cybernetic present.



Figure 4-18 Avatar damage is transliterated into electric shocks in *Tekken Torture Tournament*.

In *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001) by C-Level, including Eddo Stern and Mark Allen, participants are wired to a modded PlayStation and play the fighting game, *Tekken 3*. When a player's avatar is damaged, the player gets an electric jolt. Electrodes on the players' arms were placed specifically to inhibit ability to manipulate the game controller, forming a positive feedback loop for failure. As an avatar approaches death, the charge in the electrical current rises decreasing the player's ability to function. Abruptly aware of her material support of a fleshy, vulnerable body, cognition plummets down from abstract ideas into undeniably concrete sensations and the connection of herself and the machine. Either her motor control is lost, and she is defeated, or she manages to work through the pain and secure a series of blows to win. Fluxus artist, Nam June Paik, spoke of "laughing past duality" of yes/no, mind/body, reality/fiction, and media/medium paradigms.

Dada and grievers use outwardly aggressive techniques to collapse such divisions, but hybrid formalism takes another tack. Paik manifested this hybridity in his lighthearted intermedia works such as his television brassieres. *Tekken Torture Tournament* lets players voluntarily, yet aggressively, unravel what the normal *Tekken* games afford straightforwardly: the desire to flow in militaristic, machine logic. Instead of laughing past duality, players flinch and twitch past it. The virtual feeds back into the material and vice versa. This is what makes *Tekken Torture Tournament* a fascinating limit case for videogames. It accomplishes what other games cannot because of their service of a dominating flow, as opposed to a lateral flow that seeks divergent and messy cominglings of cybernetic monsters.



Figure 4-19 A soldier exquisitely rides out the shudder of electroshock from the *Threat-Fire Belt* that uses Taser technology for war game simulation training.

Game artist, Robert Nideffer, has noted *Tekken Torture Tournament* “takes the ‘shock controller’ metaphor marketed to sell console devices to a whole new level.”<sup>34</sup> Nideffer further recognizes that “It is only a matter of time before games incorporate all manner of sensorial feedback as part of their repertoire of possibility.” Like the avant-garde, the industry war game industry is ahead of the game industry. There are efforts to recoup pain into games so they may achieve a soldier’s flow. In

military training physical pain itself becomes a challenge, something to be conquered, rendered transparent, and integrated as just one more diegetic component in the closed narrative of victory. A company called VirTra developed the *Threat-Fire Belt*, an inward-facing Taser strapped around a trainee's waist during virtual training exercises. A soldier testing it at the annual I/ITSEC (Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation, and Education Conference) describes the thinking behind it, "I think it's a little bit better to feel a little bit of pain when you get shot so you can learn from it and not want to get shot again."<sup>35</sup> Breaking into a smile he continued, "It's a little easy to be Rambo when it doesn't hurt." The VirTra representative says, "If you get hit in the back, trust me, you'll remember it. This one will bring you to your knees. The whole idea is to fight through the pain, and keep going, just the way you've been trained." The convergence between the avant-garde and the military shouldn't surprise us. The Futurists refitted airplanes hulls to enhance the aerial acoustics of flight, changing the sound emanating from planes as they dive, roll, turn, and glide.<sup>36</sup> WWII Germany capitalized on this freshly revealed affordance, modifying Stuka Bombers to unleash that legendary metal scream, which has now become the aural icon of modern, industrial warfare. Detractors of the avant-garde have claimed what it really does is prepare the way for a complete militarization and capitalization of gamespace and the body. Ironically, this occurs when it is most formally critical of these systems. However, the avant-garde project is conducted both ahead of, and parallel to, the military and culture industry. It is a competitor who broaches alternate ways to understand, interface, and integrate with these technologies. *Tekken Torture Tournament* affordance mines human flesh, like the *Threat-Fire Belt*, but in an open rather than closed and goal-oriented way. The saturation of testosterone in *Tekken Torture* is its value, as it distorts reality so we can see it more clearly. The semiotic-dump of the "art" category becomes useful here. Since you did not buy it, you are not being trained;



you can play with it, savor it, face it, or refuse it—leveraging the postmodern hybridization of “art” to question the meaning and purpose of gameplay.



Figure 4-20 A player inserts his head into *Furminator, First Person Pinball*, which is, as the title indicates, a first-person pinball game.

*Furminator, First Person Pinball* (2004) is, a modded *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* pinball machine, mounted inside a next-gen arcade cabinet akin to *Battlezone*. The player sticks her head up through a hole while her face protected by a Plexiglas

screen and the top of the machine adjusts to each player's height, so it creates a perfect enclosed headspace. Creators Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff of the Germany-based artist group Fur, observe in dry wit, "The high velocity of the approaching ball poses a constant threat to newbies, but the experienced *furminator* pilot will quickly appreciate the improved aiming possibilities the perspective provides."<sup>37</sup> Such rhetoric further flavors the shtick along with the handy fire extinguisher nearby, clamped into the base of the cabinet. The seductive affordances of *Furminator*'s perfectly sized head-hole, carefully wrought steel treaded platform, vibrating lacrosse helmet, cabinet's ethereal white carapace, all gel together comprising a polished experience of high camp.



Figure 4-21 An internal camera allows gallery-goers watch the flinching *Furminator* pilot.

Videogames have been called a lean-forward medium compared to the lean-back medium of viewing television, but *Furminator* introduces the "lean-up"

videogame. The player's body feels disconnected below, while their head is docked to gamespace with godlike eyes hovering immediately above it. Instead of using digital technology, virtual reality, or rendering engines for immersion, *Furminator* uses old-fashioned mechanical techniques and the kludge of visual proximity. Unlike *Tekken Torture Tournament*, *Furminator* lets us get as close as we can to seeing pain without feeling it. As eyeball-sized pinballs glance everywhere, ricocheting threateningly near player eyes, the feeling of proximity is heightened—and heightened further in force-feedback flippers and a pulsing helmet. When *Furminator* enters “multiball mode” a handful of silver balls are ejected simultaneously, visually overloading the player as silver streaks fly. It physicalizes a dream of Greenberg, wherein the eye finally experiences the world haptically—vision becomes tactile. Hacking our visual-physiological wiring, our body feels violated by the spectacular action, yet remains surprisingly, safely distanced from it.

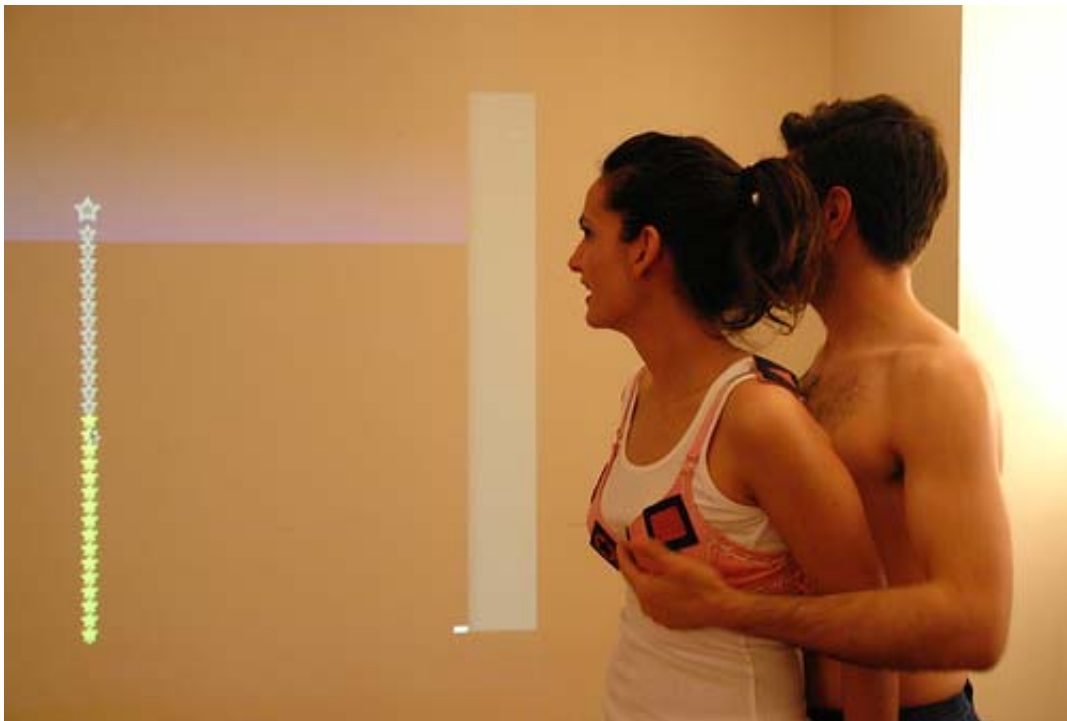


Figure 4-22 Like a remedial couples therapy, players learn to touch each other in *Intimate Controllers*.

*Intimate Controllers* (2007) by Jenny Chowdhury enables experiences that run contrary to the optically threatened, and solitary, *Furminator*. *Intimate Controllers* imposes an awkward, pedantic intimacy upon two players who must cooperate to complete levels in a rhythm matching game. The usual videogame input devices of controller, wand, or mouse, and keyboard, are replaced by a woman's bra and a man's underwear with embedded sensors. To play is to press, squeeze, and rub someone else's body. Taken literally, *Intimate Controllers* provides remedial intimacy training for estranged couples. As the practical component of her PhD thesis at Tisch School of the Arts (NYU), Chowdhury claimed that piece was for "gamer widows," women who suffer sexually inattentive partners who play too much *World of Warcraft*. Each controller is embedded with six sensors placed with varying degrees of intimacy in erogenous zones. The active bodyspace moves from the shoulders to the waist, sides and breasts on the woman and to the thighs, hips, and buttocks on the male. Players only win more intimate positioning together. *Intimate Controllers* humorously-sadistically restricts affection even as it creates a gamespace in which to foster affection.

It is a provocative work in spite of Chowdhury's intent stated in her thesis. This contradiction is not uncommon for great avant-garde works, especially by academics, *Façade* presenting a famous case. *Intimate Controllers* makes contact rhetorical and literal by ordering one-to-one relationships, for example, a lover's fingertips on female nipples = level 3 intimacy. It eschews flourishes of one-to-many, many-to-one, or asymmetrical relationships, that cybernetic works usually seek to explore, however. Hybrid works do not need to be determined by discrete, sequential goal-oriented behavior. Cyborg games can inject pleasure by more freely and slovenly crosswiring desire, bodies, and technology. In her cyborg manifesto,

Donna Haraway describes this as key to understanding the power of cybernetically-enhanced sexuality:

Cyborg “sex” restores some of the lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism). Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction. [...] Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling [...] emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than leveraging the spontaneous and exploratory affordances of cybernetic sexuality, Chowdhury inadvertently renders “augmented affection” embarrassing, punitive, remedial. Its comical nature is intentional. However, touch is proceduralized into level progression. In this sense, *Intimate Controllers* recapitulates the tunneling, level-grinding nature in the *World of Warcraft* in its remedial intimacy and goal-oriented view of sex. The social dynamic that Chowdhury was trying to confront and overturn is captured and perpetuated, albeit comically, in her work. Another kind of intimate grip is made available, a soft and fleshy grip on the surface, but one that functions similar to the familiar mechanistic paradigms of MMO play once that soft grip is exercised and squeezed.



Figure 4-23 *Massage me* reframes the human back as a conduit into gamespace, affording uneven and contingent exchanges of sensuality, activity, and passivity.

Compared to *Intimate Controllers*, *Massage me* (2007) introduces more cybernetic affordances to open up negotiable and varied augmented affections. *Massage Me* puts two people in an asymmetrical relationship: the single player operates the game by massaging someone wearing a vest with embedded sensors on its back. Its creators, the artist's group Kobakantinen, claim that it "turns a video game player's excess energy into a back massage for an innocent bystander."<sup>39</sup> The game pad becomes a pleasure center for contact, and the "addicted game player becomes an inexhaustible masseur." Haraway argues that cybernetics facilitates desires to couple with concepts in emergent ways. Things and ideas finally link up, which normally can't touch. Giving sensual pleasure as a byproduct of gameplay, what is usually disembodied and abstracted to the screen, collapses a division that we have taken for granted. To give into one pleasure: playing a game, gives rise to another pleasure: kneading the back of another human. The work allows aggression,

in the form of a fighting game, to milk and commiserate with groping, in the product of the massaging action. The massaged person's (supposed) pleasure and the player's back-kneading fury blend into an asymmetrical and cybernetic social frame.

The games just discussed about pain were made primarily by men. The latter games, made by women, cultivate opportunities for machine-enhanced intimacy between lovers. The logic of the pain games seems to be that the cyborg of the player-videogame is a traumatic linkage; the cyborg blend is a threat to autonomous body and the authority of the ego. The logic of the intimacy games is that the cyborg is a linkage that enlarges the world; the cyborg blend augments affections, as we stumblingly seek new kinds of couplings via technology. In this sense, these works confirm and perpetuate a gender gap regarding the cyborg player. Perhaps a way to close the gulf would be to play the games of the gender of which we don't identify. This way neglected "widows" could playfully electrocute their lovers, and males could explore a "widow's" desire through an enabling veil of technology.





Figure 4-24 *Darkgame* conveys information through vibrations onto a player's head, supplanting the visual dimension of gamespace with a cranial dimension.

Hyper-cyborg tactics can get even less literal, less one-to-one, affordance mining human sensuality even more dynamically and fluidly. For example, Brion Gysin and Ian Somerville created the hypnagogic *Dreamachine* in 1961 after reading *The Living Brain* by W. Grey Walter. *Dreamachine* was “the first art object to be seen with the eyes closed.” Its pulsating light alters the brain’s electrical oscillations by stimulating the optical nerve. Through closed eyes, viewers see bright and complex lattices of color—an effect that can be “turned off” by simply opening one’s eyes. A game that delves further into the hyper-cyborg than the pain and intimacy games above is *Darkgame* (*prototype stage*), another piece by Eddo Stern. In *Darkgame* (*prototype*) two players maneuver avatars in 2D space and their movements are projected on a gallery wall. Each player is given one of two channels of sensual output, either sight or touch, from which they must surmise what's happening. As



the person playing off the screen gets shot, fuzzy spots grow, obscuring their vision, and the vision of other gallery-goers. The second player receives information haptically through a force-feedback helmet, an orange octopus with cranium-wrapping tentacles. Contours of virtual spaces and actions vibrate through one or more of the tentacles. "DZZZT" on one side indicates damage to that side, while a milder "dzzzt" indicates the avatar just brushed a wall. Gameplay yields a simultaneous sense "deprivation and sensory overload." Although it is touted as a game accessible to the visually impaired, its most interesting feature is the fact that it allows sighted players to sense a kind of blindness, and to play with a slow debilitation of sense. Navigating by the helmet, the player is aware of a gaping lack in the visual field. You can see, but your eyes are, oddly, useless. Sensations of "skin chatter" replace customary visual sensations. Entrained to devote so many perceptual cycles to sight, diverting that channel into the scalp gives way to a strange new grip on our visual apparatus. We can feel our familiar sense ratios morph around to adjust to the new matrix of stimuli.

As Haraway advises, *Darkgame* enables participatory openness and emergent couplings in its play. Similar to Yoko Ono's *White Chess*, players become better competitors if they cooperate a little. "DZZZT" provokes one to ask, "Is that you shooting me?" As the visual player becomes blind, she might rely on the sound of their partner's helmet buzzing to detect if she indeed landed a shot. The cyborg artist exploits whichever player-videogame connections might be psychologically, neurologically, symbolically, culturally, or socially had. In order to play at all, players must recapitulate the creative searching used in the game's creation. This requires oscillation between collaboration and competition, decoupling and recoupling. Handling all these circuits experimentally manifests new couplings with the technology that might be more desirable than they are presently. It can also

render the extant couplings that we now take for granted, less desirable, or even problematic.

## Mediating Narcissism

Videogames compensate for a diffuse fear in technoculture of psychological disintegration. A fear of falling apart, of losing the integrity of one's personality, is one that modernists explore and aggravate, while postmodernists smooth over and celebrate. Psychoanalysis regarded psychological integration as the goal of human development. Freud postulated a Superego that forces our schizophrenic Id into alignment. Lacan described the "mirror stage," in which the crawling infant sees its reflection in a mirror. Because the reflection appears much more coherent than how the bumbling infant feels, she aspires to become as perfect as her own image. This image of herself is internalized and develops into what she conceives of as her identity. Videogames use the mirror stage to keep us suspended as we look into the mirror, fixing our image toward perfection. Flow games tease us with the premise of having fallen, or being about to fall, into pieces; but then provide us with the very means to hold gamespace, and therefore ourselves, together. We set worlds right and defeat the perfectly-paced onslaught of chaotic creatures escaped from the unconscious.

The real-time feedback loop is a property of video as well as videogames. Video is clearly a medium that has influenced videogames, as many hybrid artists such as Cory Arcangel acknowledge. The feedback loop in video is limited to audiovisual information; video does not have the manipulative capacities of the videogame form (controllers, software, and so on). The formal essence of video as an artistic medium is literally *narcissism* according to Rosalind Krauss.<sup>40</sup> This

observation was made in the 1970s and was prescient, as it is confirmed by millions of online videos today. Nevertheless, even today, hybrid artists can interrogate video, as a technocultural mirror, more thoroughly than the webcam confessionals of *Lonelygirl15*.



Figure 4-25 In *Boomerang* (1974), Nancy Holt speaks to herself through a recorded delay, providing her a disorienting way of realizing a skewed form of self-intimacy.

In 1974, Richard Serra and Nancy Holt created a video piece entitled *Boomerang*. Holt is framed close-up, wearing a headset with microphone. As she speaks, her words are delayed by a half second and fed back to her through the headphones. The audience hears both the live and delayed feeds, forming a double echo. For ten minutes she describes the experience and how it affects her cognition: “Sometimes, I find I can’t quite say a word because I hear a first part come back and I forget the second part, or my head is stimulated in a new direction by the first half

of the word.”<sup>41</sup> Holt gets increasingly out of sync with herself. She describes in real-time how the disparity between her perception and her speaking self “puts a distance between the words and their apprehension—their comprehension.” It is a situation that is “like a mirror-reflection . . . so that I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me . . . there is no escape.” It’s her own estranged, material presence that is inescapable: “I’m throwing things out in the world and they are boomeranging back . . . boomeranging. . . eranginging. . . anginging.” The performance explores the narcissistic quality of mediation by experimenting with how humans can interact with video. We want media to serve as a mirror, and we only want it to distort our reality in very specific ways. The complicit formal avant-garde distorts media in other ways for us to play with. In what ways can videogames mediate narcissism? First we must examine how games mediate narcissism under normal conditions.

We identify not only with the protagonist of the game, but all of gamespace. Space in videogames is the meta-protagonist more often than not. We are the space. It is a procedural mirror of our logic of the world. We want to see ourselves in the mirror more than anything else. The space must be dominated through, cleaned up, tunneled through, explored, and seen. Doing so, we flesh out our new body of gamespace, *as gamespace itself*. “The map is not merely the environment for the story; it’s the hero of the story. We must reveal it. Then we must spread out through it. Then we must conquer forces within it that oppose our complete embodiment of it.”<sup>42</sup> In the beginning of *Civilization* strategy games about world-domination, the map is blackened out. Out there, lurking in the darkness, are other empires waiting to be crushed militarily or assimilated culturally. We think of the entire space as ours from the beginning. It is our future body we fill up and grow into over the course of the game. Other empires in *Civilization* are cultures almost in the bacterial

sense, which we must eliminate or absorb into our body. This metanarrative is found in a wide variety of videogames, and analogous to the washing up of all the technocolored goo in *Super Mario Sunshine*, or even the alignment and eliminating of block chain in *Tetris*. Videogames are not a simulation of the real world, but a simulation of an “inner world” to explore, spread out, and master. They are also simulations of how we have internalized other media. For example, *Madden NFL* is not a simulation of football, but of our memories of televised football.<sup>43</sup> *Grand Theft Auto* is not a simulation of urban decay and crime, but of the spectacular mediation of this subject. Through the hybridity of the videogame form, as an externalization of the mind, we can actually examine ourselves as we experiment with its technology.



Figure 4-26 *Q4U* by Feng Mengbo enables players to examine how narcissism constructs identity in videogames.

Feng Mengbo is a Beijing-based artist who created *Q4U* (2002), a customization of *Quake III Arena*. On its surface, the game is a predictable critique of FPS games as “ego-shooters” because Mengbo replicated his face in the game so that every avatar is him. The replicated model is a self-portrait and shirtless instance of Mengbo in U.S.-issue Army pants, gripping a video camera in one hand and a plasma rifle in the other. Whenever the game is exhibited, 84 gallery-goers and networked player login to play and inevitably commit mass suicide. To amplify the house-of-mirrors quality, the game is projected over three large screens measuring over 100 square feet and each from a different perspective. Mengbo claimed to be both attracted and repulsed by videogame violence and said he wanted to “document all the terrible things.” It delivers the familiar FPS experience but condenses it into a furious moment of kill-or-be-killed by design. *Q4U* reproduces the killing act several times a second, but also makes it identical, unworking it as an abstracted killing act. If the player wants to run around shooting things, she ends up killing herself, her own avatar, over and over. A gameplay convention of the FPS genre is externalized, making it difficult to reincorporate back inside the channel of flow. *Q4U* folds the gamespace logic of spatial and procedural dominance in on itself, not unlike Holt’s voice interrupting itself in *Boomerang*. You can perform in the game, as Holt could in the video loop, but the meaning of that performance becomes blurred the more you try to get in the loop.

If we take the title *Q4U* as a “cue for you,” what are we being cued or signaled to do? The excessively singular feature of the videogame makes the shooting act visible for what it is a stand-in for. What previously appeared as different entities: enemies, allies, slime molds, etc., disintegrate into a smooth, undifferentiated entity. The game does not “document all the terrible things,” but

the reductive, scopic aggression of the genre. Underlying this, however, it actually does document the common act of ego-formation in gamespace. It reveals how players treat gamespace like a fantastic Id-space that they must subdue into dormancy. Charles Bernstein saw the genius of videogames as that they give us “a place to play out these neo-Luddite sentiments: slay the dragon, the ghost in the machine, the berserk robots. What we are fighting is the projection of our sense of inferiority before our own creation.”<sup>44</sup> A mirroring engine like *Q4U* starts where games like *Civilization* and *Super Mario Sunshine* tease us toward but never let us reach. *Q4U* collapses the cycle, revealing how it would close if it could. The loose strands are all finally knotted up for us to pick it apart from the other side of gameplay. We are no longer “inferior to our own reflection,” but are inseparable from it, saturating it. We are looking out from within the mirror, and realize that it isn’t such a “terrible thing” after all, it is just our own ego-tripping wishing to feel in control, yearning for greater abstraction in killing.



Figure 4-27 In *2ndPS2* the player sees the game from her enemy's eyes in a paradoxical fusion of scopophilia and paranoia.

Julian Oliver invented the “second-person shooter” genre, creating *2ndPS2* (Second Person Shooter for Two Players) in Blender as a first prototype. In *Q4U* killing yourself or someone else is inevitable, but in *2ndPS2* killing or getting killed won't happen without some accidental cooperation. The player does not see gamespace from her own avatar's perspective, but from the perspective of her opponent's avatar instead. To find out where her avatar is, her opponent must look at her. To shoot the enemy, she must rotate her avatar (from the third-person so it is facing the camera) and fire. In order to win, she must adjust to this novel cybernetic loop more quickly than her enemy. *2ndPS2* allows a player to play against a bot. Shooting causes the bot to flee. In the first-person, the player watches it escape,



scraping along the wall as she blindly chases it, firing blind. Oliver created a second version of *2ndPS2* using more polished graphics and enabling networked play online. The third iteration is may be more promising:

Where to from here? Perhaps a mod that allows many people to play simultaneously; a hoppable second-person view matrix allowing you to change to any view other than your own. There would be a strategic component where views themselves are resources that need to be managed toward the ends of finding yourself in the arena long enough to gain control, bumping others over to a new view as required. Weapons could include a POV-grenade that shuffles all the current views of players within impact range. FOV-weapons (i've already made a couple) that suddenly throw the target into orthogonal views or warp the current camera as though the world were a rippling surface.<sup>45</sup>

Oliver has a lyrically loose grasp of the player-videogame cyborg, which allows him to see innumerable variant couplings. The strength of hybrid formalism is that it can explore the limits of players' senses and logic while not going as far as the most radical formalists, who dive into wholly unknown territory seeking alien conventions and materiality to hunt down and strip bare. This avant-garde's varying degree of complicity with mainstream design makes it more familiar, but also more pragmatic in transforming popular understanding of the medium. As Haraway argues, we all already live as cyborgs. The complicit formal avant-garde sweetly reveals or militaristically revels in this fact, and further, demonstrating just how particular we are about the cybernetic couplings we like. As the avant-garde explores new kinds of hybridity, will players embrace their squirming, jolted, and unfolding selves?

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## CHAPTER 5: COMPLICIT POLITICAL: UTOPIA AS EVERYDAY PROCESS

### Not Playing “Against” Capitalism

The complicit political avant-garde frames reality as game by leveraging mass media and using the cultural penetration of technocultural institutions. The everyday aspects of life become malleable and reinterpretable. In the beginning of the radical political chapter, I argued that the historical avant-garde transformed the institution of art from within. The only reason that we know about the historical political avant-garde is because they succeeded and were co-opted by the same institution of art that they attacked. This paradox was not only evident at some later date, but was evident at the time in the very strategy of Dadaists. In “Dada at Two Speeds” Marcel Janco writes:

[As early as 1917] Our nihilists, who were insulting art, were directing our galleries and writing our catalogue introductions. [...] We had gone beyond the first speed, the negative speed. [The second speed was] the prophetic work of the positive Dada, which opened art a new road, upon which [...] artistic creativity has remained dependent through the present day.<sup>1</sup>

We might ask: if art was to be “destroyed,” how could Dadaists organize shows and print magazines and catalogs that will perpetuate the myth and category of art? An entity or institution that condemns its own existence, but does not dismantle itself, turns on an paradoxical axis of complicity, at least in some way, with the powers maintaining the status quo. A certain amount of willful “impurity,” and soft hypocrisy, affords social scalability, and a greater level of continuity to the avant-

garde event. This is not an anomaly but a trend in the avant-garde. In 1918, Wassily Kandinsky joined the arts leadership of the People's Commissariat for Public Instruction in revolutionary Russia, organizing a museum network and planning a national avant-garde art education program. Dada had to be partially complicit with the same institution it was opening and transforming. Could it be any other way? To open and unwork an institution you must be able to relate or interact with it in some way, so the fantasy of a negation emerging from some pure, sacred space is a farce. This should render any assumption that a political avant-garde can only "oppose," "negate," and "protest," as ahistorical, purist, and idealistic. Complicity is an affordance that avant-garde leverages to accomplish different things from what a mythically pure, radical strategy can accomplish.

Like the radical political avant-garde, the "institution" that today's complicit political avant-garde is coming out of, and explicitly turning back against and politicizing, is entertainment in technoculture. Alternate reality games (ARGs) bridge avant-garde political practice, popular entertainment, and games, in a partially complicit way. Jane McGonigal is the most iconic and prolific creator and proselytizer of complicit avant-garde game events. If a "great artist" had to represent this avant-garde, it would clearly be her. McGonigal says, "Reality is broken. Game designers can fix it." Her website invokes the avant-garde in its title, "www.AvantGame.com." McGonigal is Director of Game Research & Development at the Institute of the Future, a spinoff of the RAND Corporation, founded by the United States Army Air Forces.



Figure 5-1 Players of *Cruel 2 B Kind*, an alternate reality game of “benevolent assassination.”

An alternate reality game is an interactive narrative played by scalable communities across media platforms. ARGs are coordinated through a range of communication technologies in addition to physical spaces such as the streets or parks in urban environments. ARG communication flows digitally, through internet and cell phones, though traditional media, such as radio, cinema, newspapers, and billboards, and through such spaces as subways and shopping malls. For the sake of brevity, within the term “alternate reality game” I am including: big games, pervasive games, immersive games, urban games, and chaotic fiction.<sup>2</sup> Elan Lee tells the story of an alternate reality game that refused to end.<sup>3</sup> An actor contracted for the game announced to the assembled players that the game was over, and they had done well: they had won. After applause and congratulations, the actor left, boarding a city bus to go home, but a handful of players followed him onto the bus.



They sat silently staring at him. He laughed and gently explained that he perfectly understands their drive to keep playing, but he reiterated: “We are not playing the game anymore. You guys won.” This problem common to alternate reality games is their TING (“This Is Not a Game”) quality. Like the grey goo of the radical political avant-garde, alternate reality games are designed to be uncontainable. What if the players had not *really* won yet? What if the actor’s announcement was just another challenge, one more layer of illusion before the true ending is revealed?

What began as an innocuous, banal, alternate reality game, slid into something else. The affordance of being “just a game,” and not some overtly political or expressly artistic event, allowed for the slippage. Instead of denying the fantasy of the game, like a radical griever, the magic circle of an ARG subverts and disturbs established conventions and rituals in subtler and more seductive ways. ARGs have the potential to rework untapped affordances of social and technological networks by distributing power among the group, making social reality more malleable and experimental. When it succeeds, hybrid political practice is exuberant; it seems to render the transformation of our social relations and political structures inevitable. When it fails, it alienates itself from the mainstream and falls into harassment or incomprehensibility of the radical political avant-garde. However, distinguishing between success and failure can become, in itself, a conundrum when players delude themselves in a celebratory fashion.

The *radical* of radical political does not mean a more powerful, but more an unrelenting refusal to comply with “traditional” cultural logics of entertainment such as power, control, desire, and fear. Grievors are on the extreme end of remix culture. The complicit figures discussed in this chapter are more hybridized with the mainstream. Their challenges are a bit more easily understood, especially because

“playing with technoculture” is becoming less strange every year. They blend confrontation with conformity, logic with nonsense. By using media, art, and language in ways that are both traditional and surprising, they expand and diversify our ways of thinking about popular media. Nimble at capturing the social imagination, their work is more sustainable and reproducible than the radical political avant-garde can be, or wishes to be. To understand the game’s story becomes a massive exercise in treasure hunting and “contemporary archeology.” Several of the most famous ARGs, such as *The Beast*, involved solving a murder. The key is to build intrigue and suspense, as ARG designer Elan Lee explains:

We spend a lot of time playing the ‘What if?’ game. What if when you woke up in the morning none of your friends remembered your name, and your car only drove in reverse, and you got strange mail from a stranger telling you to meet him on a street corner because he has a briefcase that you absolutely have to get.<sup>4</sup>

Over the course of several years and dozens of ARGs, designers have found that conspiracies are most compelling when shared. Massively distributed mysteries generate a social frame in which cross-cultural interaction becomes an asset, as does having a broad spread of professional disciplines among players. *The Lost Ring*, part of the 2008 Olympics, had media components in Chinese, German, Japanese, Spanish, French, English, and even Esperanto. This encouraged people to collaborate people from other backgrounds, valuing their cultural and linguistic differences. Diverse skill sets become valuable to the community of players, as programmers, mathematicians, zoologists, historians, and so on, can play a leading role in turn as the community adjusts. An IT specialist turned white hat hacker gains administrator access to a fake website that was meant to be cracked. Once inside the site, the group

finds a blurry x-ray in need graphical restoration by graphics programmer, and interpretation by a radiologist. As findings are posted, the collective of player detectives gropes its way to the next step of the game. McGonigal audaciously wagers with a wink: “By 2018 extreme-scale collaboration is the most important **human ability**.”<sup>5</sup>

Frederic Jameson argues in his essay, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” that the culture industry constantly gives us glimpses of utopia in all its products from films to pop songs. These glimpses safely release pressure for social change that could otherwise dangerously buildup. Pseudo-revolutionary, the conventional channels of mass-consumption are a critical release valve. However, even for a Marxist like Jameson, political radicalism is no longer viable and complicity with the market is the only way a contemporary political avant-garde could be effective:

the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on the social as well as a spatial scale.<sup>6</sup>

ARGs surprisingly fit Jameson's description for how a contemporary political art might operate. The puzzles and missions of ARGs are solved through the concerted effort of players, who constitute a kind of ad-hoc "collective detective" and whose numbers may range for the dozens to the hundreds of thousands. Geographically distributed across neighborhoods or continents, ARG players gather and evaluate the scattered bits of the game. Any and every potential channel of new and old media becomes fodder. Technoculture is reflected and simulated in ARGs in way that makes the world seem both whole, yet also in play. ARGs are capable of totalizing descriptions but also radical shifts and reconfigurations of those descriptions. The question is: How hard are people willing to play with the world?

Political ARG organizers, like McGonigal, do not play "against" capitalism, blaming it for the fact that "reality is broken." Instead, they suggest that our culture can play its way forward, often through social challenges. The complicit avant-garde has adapted strategies of what Bernie DeKoven called the 1960s antiwar "new games movement." DeKoven coined the term "co-liberation" and "well-played game" to describe how individual players improve and amplify each other when they play as a team. In well-played games, skill and confidence are contagious, and each person's abilities resonate with those of others. This renders the solution space more plastic and personable so that every player is given room to maneuver and perform meaningfully within it. Formal game literacy is spreading, albeit in a simplified form; as companies like Nintendo expand demographics to sweep up non-gamers through highly consumable kitsch products. The same thing is occurring politically. The marketing departments at Microsoft or DreamWorks are investing in the development of ARGs and promoting them to the mainstream. The fact that such games give people a reason for coming together in the streets and online, even without a traditional political agenda, is in itself, transformative of

power. The strategy of today's hybrid avant-garde grows out of complicity. When participatory practices are not overtly political, they may in fact be able to exert more continuous and participatory cultural forces. While talking about consumer-oriented remix culture, like fan fiction, and not directly addressing ARGs, Jenkins makes a similar assessment:

Does making politics into a kind of popular culture allow consumers to apply fan expertise to their civic responsibilities? Parody newscasts like *The Daily Show* may be teaching us to do just that. [...] *The Daily Show*, a nightly parody of news, quickly emerged as the focal point for this debate. Comedy Central offered more hours of coverage of the 2004 Democratic and Republican National Conventions than ABC, CBS and NBC combined: the news media was walking away from historic responsibilities, and popular culture was taking its pedagogical potential more seriously. [...] we may be able to talk across our differences if we find commonalities through our fantasies. This is in the end another reason why popular culture matters politically—because it doesn't seem to be about politics at all.<sup>7</sup>

Alternate reality games provide a seemingly innocuous social frame in which anyone to participate. Even so, ARGs call upon players to question and play with the very systems and networks that make their formation possible. The polis talks to and adjusts itself dynamically, and both positive and negative forces are required to achieve this dynamism. When ARG players come together in public, as flash mobs or collective detectives, the experience has a hopeful quality to it, but also it also exhibits some of the qualities of grieving, and the experience is an odd mutant of spectacle and anti-spectacle.

## **Mainstream Politics vs. Avant-garde Politics**

What “political” means to mainstream culture is different than what it means for avant-garde culture. Mainstream notions of political are institutional, and “politics” is seen as how the status quo regulates itself. Politics is framed as a battleground between dominant and established ideologies, for example, between progressivism and conservatism, which is, in turn, managed by parties such Democrats and Republicans. Mainstream politics is issue-based and party-ruled, top-down, and bureaucratic. Party systems, special interests, constituencies, alliances, nations, and so on, define mainstream political agendas. “Politics” occurs in special places, on particular days, by representative people following procedural rules. What “politics” means to the avant-garde is the reverse of the mainstream conception. Politics occurs not on voting day or in capital buildings. Politics is not about process, but about reordering process. Politics occurs via events in which the social order is itself disturbed and reconfigured. Politics is invasive and expansive with its force affecting our everyday lives. Avant-garde politics politicizes life-stuff that doesn’t appear to be political, but seems biological, corporate, natural, scientific, religious, technological, geographic, etc.



Figure 5-2 Players of *BorderXing* sneak across the legal borders of countries.

*BorderXing* is complicit avant-garde game sponsored by the Tate Gallery London. The game challenge is mostly the domain of “casual” players who cross borders of European countries surreptitiously, but are not doing so to move there or relocate, but to play. Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon are trying to “delete the border” by facilitating border hacking on a collective scale. An online database (only accessible in certain geographic locations) advises and documents how to sneak across borders without passports or detection by customs, immigration, police, media or military. The work manifests the world it wants within its magic circle, it doesn’t wait for it, or debate how it should come. Rather than “officially” proposing

a referendum on national borders, or hosting a televised debate on the social benefit of border enforcement, as a traditional political strategy would entail, the game approaches these things orthogonally, allowing people to *live otherwise* through play.

It is a complicit political work because it helps players transgress divisions that are both bureaucratic and geographic, but it does so in the guise of “danger tourism,” perhaps even “poverty tourism.” If *BorderXing* actually facilitated “illegal immigration” through its magic circle, rather than well-off (Germans, French, Spanish, etc.) hikers playing around in the mountains dodging militaries and police forces, then it would be more radical. In a related piece by Bunting and Rachel Baker called *SuperWeed*, avant-garde politics works on a much smaller scale, as players construct herbicide-resistant seed bombs to be thrown into barren spaces in the urban landscape.

Some ARGs have been overtly political in the sense that they tackle political “issues,” such as humanitarian crises, or climate change. The vast majority ARGs that have caught popular steam have not been overtly political, however. Elan Lee contends that ARGs should remain non-political entertainment because they could be misused to manipulate players toward malicious ends, such as defaming political targets, converging mobs on homes and businesses, destroying property, and so on. ARGs with corporate sponsorship specifically emphasize that they are entirely apolitical entertainment. However, when large bodies of people build networks from the bottom up without centralized leadership or infrastructural guidance, their new kinds of participation in technoculture is itself a feat that leads toward participatory politics—regardless of the intent or commercial impetus behind the work. *The Beast* was sponsored by Microsoft to promote the Steven Spielberg film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. The more purist we are, the more difficult it is to rectify an



institutionally-sponsored avant-garde by the Tate or by Microsoft. But this is why the label complicit is used in the first place. The easiest way to qualify the complicit political avant-garde is according to how it fosters emergent collective behavior—social waves that have the power to realize a social structure through play and then avail that structure to perpetual self-transformation.

The word *politics* is derived from the Greek *polis*, which meant the city, and more specifically, its body of citizens. The city was understood as a social relationship as well as a geographic location. Greeks referred to “Spartans” and “Athenians” as often, perhaps more often, than to “Sparta” or “Athens.” The complicit political avant-garde fixates on this social root of politics, framing urban life as a matrix of social relationships to be enriched from as many actors as possible. The complicit political avant-garde redefines politics and the political, by taking the terms back to their etymological root in the polis. For this very reason, it does not seem “political” in the commonly accepted sense. To hybridize politics is to rearrange our understanding of how power is distributed and should function in society. The politics of the complicit political avant-garde is: bottom-up, festive, media savvy, creative, active, personal, social, open and everyday. In *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* (1971) Stewart Brand summarized this constructivist sentiment, “We’re not into utopian thinking around here, preferring a more fiasco-by-fiasco approach to perfection.” It is about the process of continually transforming the social infrastructure, rendering it open and accessible, rather than marching collectively onwards and upwards toward a predetermined utopian destination (that exists nowhere but in our fictions, fantasies, and manifestos).



Figure 5-3 Situationist graffiti says, “Never Work,” from the mass demonstrations that swept France in May 1968.

Every political avant-garde lives and reacts to its own time. The Situationists in 1960s France were the first to articulate a revitalization of the polis by trying to socially distribute power through the affordances of new media. They took the remix tactics of Dada and wished for a broader public to use them, not just artists. In 1968, America was fighting its first “living-room war” in Vietnam. Violence was erupting domestically in the U.S. in race riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F Kennedy, and the demonstrations and violent police responses at the Democratic convention of the same year. In France, severe inflation was crippling the French economy and daily life was broadly impacted. In March of ‘68, anarchist and Leftist students seized power at Nanterre University on the outskirts of Paris, demanding government reform. The Situationists threw fuel on the fire with manifestos and flyers that gave voice to what many people were feeling. Situationist-inspired graffiti slogans read: “Never Work!” and “We will ask nothing. We will demand nothing. We will take, occupy.” Protesters were not united, but that did not dilute the fervor of the demonstrations. Crowds waved black flags

symbolizing anarchy and red flags symbolizing socialism. To dispel student protests, the de Gaulle government sent in police, but their strong-arm tactics against the students only inflamed public sentiment. By May, what were previously only student protests erupted into a nation-wide revolt with ten million people, two-thirds of the French workforce, on strike. Protestors numbered up to ten million by June.

The apparent revolution dissipated as quickly as it began, and people began going back to work soon after. Eventually, in an emergency election, the Gaullist party was even reelected. The whole endeavor was a failure politically, because the centralized power structure of French government had survived. But the political energy that had been generated did not simply dissipate. Media theorist, Paul Virilio, recalls this moment:

In 1968 nothing changed in political terms, but everything changed in cultural terms. (The stress has too often been put on the political aspect.) It is not by chance that writers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari appeared immediately after 1968.<sup>8</sup>

The political defeats of the 1960s turned into cultural victories in the 1970s and 1980s. The period saw the rise of postmodern conceptions of and practices in culture and media. The movement was successful as a soft, *avant-garde political* revolution, not a hard, *traditional political* revolution. It is too simple to claim that this historical moment alone caused such tectonic cultural change. Nevertheless, 1968 catalyzed a shift in mainstream French attitudes from traditional understanding of top-down structural power to more avant-garde understanding of distributed power. Mainstream America has moved toward the expanded definition of politics,

espoused by the complicit political avant-garde, over the course of the 20th century, but especially since the 60s as well. Racial segregation and the traditional domination of women by men shifted from largely invisible social norms into tangible and confrontational political concepts. Women's bodies, the insides of homes and schools, etc., were all politicized. The avant-garde adds categories to politics, while the status quo attempts to maintain, order, and perhaps reduce, existing categories. Despite a strong backlash, an expanding sense of what "political" means is gaining ground in the early 21st century, and nothing is safe.

### **Playing with the Everyday**

What moments of time are not safely labeled as "work," "playing videogames," "commuting," etc.? As Hans claims, play is only itself when the real is actually placed at risk. Play only occurs if the Real is invited to the game. To play with everyday life is to rediscover a "non-ironic kind of realism" in our life while maintaining its "unpreciousness" and efficacy.<sup>9</sup> Everyday life is politicized through play. This "politics" is not mainstream politics driven by talking points and heated debate. This is avant-garde "politics" which opens up the everyday, which challenges the constitution of reality, all through playful action. The customary categories of work and leisure, of private and public action bleed into one another, irrupting into odd shapes and new domains. The premodern magic circle of ARGs ports play into everyday life, pushing experience beyond "leisure time" and into unnamed categories of experience. The more fundamental the reality check, the stranger it appears to commonsense thinking. The more of the hypnagogic Real we must face. For Situationists, "the most general aim must be to broaden the non-mediocre portion of life, to reduce its empty moments as much as possible."<sup>10</sup> The essence of the everyday is its inexhaustible ambiguity and its undeniable materiality.

The radical formal avant-garde denies that painting must serve a text, or be a “stooge of literature,” or that videogames must flow. The radical formal avant-garde explores the form of mediums in three ways: materially, sensually and conventionally. The complicit political avant-garde does the same things, but with the everyday urban world serving as the artistic medium. Ivan Chhtcheglov’s theory of “new urbanism” was a major precursor to the Situationists:

All cities are geological and you can’t take three steps without encountering ghosts, armed with the prestige of their legends. We evolve in a closed landscape whose landmarks draw us incessantly toward the past. Shifting angles and receding perspectives enable us to perceive original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magic lands of folklore and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, small forgotten bars, prehistoric caves, casino mirrors.<sup>11</sup>

When we first walk onto the sidewalk or into the grocery store, log into an email server or networked game, the possible range of relationships and activities that could occur is severely limited by our expectations — what we think is supposed to occur in those spaces. We see the material and social worlds through a series of cultural and technological filters. The same is obviously true of the mediascape. Every variable needs a name and a quantity in technoculture. In Facebook, we classify people by our relationship to them (lived with, worked with, dated), by their links to our friends, and by a dozen other semantic and procedural mechanisms. This formalization seems to be necessary to industrial and post-industrial modernization. The process certainly did not begin with the introduction of computers into our industry and bureaucracy; however, the way we have deployed

the computer since the mid-twentieth century has accelerated the process and led to the proceduralization of even those aspects of our lives that the earlier industrial revolution left untouched. Critics and theorists have in fact been arguing against this tendency to proceduralize throughout the 20th century.

George Bataille critiqued our tendency toward “the renunciation of life in exchange for function.” We calibrate ourselves to our technologies at the cost of losing what our technologies cannot process or interface with. The moment-to-moment ways in which we define ourselves and our actions are predetermined by what we have already seen mediated thousands of times and what our media afford. Felix Guattari argued, “The only acceptable goal of human activities is the production of a subjectivity that constantly self-enriches its relationship with the world.”<sup>12</sup> Complicit avant-garde politics generate the cultural frames in which we can recover this desire, now partially buried under the afforded functions and spectacles of mass media. They pull new life through atrophied functions.

## **GoonSwarm and Transformative Griefing**

Everyday life increasingly unfolds in virtual worlds. The complicit avant-garde can transform the nature of an online MMO, enriching our relationship with the virtual world. *EVE Online* is a capitalist and brutal MMO with a science-fiction theme. Warring player factions rule a vast universe of thousands of star systems with planets, moons, asteroids, and wormholes. It takes months of grinding effort to build up a respectable, customized ship for a player to pilot. Beyond combat, players engage in mining, piracy, trade, and manufacturing. Large ships can be worth thousands of real world dollars when sold or traded. *EVE* is a *persistent* world. When a ship is defeated in battle, it is erased from the game, and its real world value is also

lost. Grievers from the Something Awful forums, calling themselves “goons” comprise the GoonSwarm Alliance. GoonSwarm managed to defeat the Band of Brothers ship through emergent gameplay tactics. At one point, the Band of Brothers Guild had the most highly valued ship in the game, before GoonSwarm surprised everybody by destroying it. The goons figured out that by creating and launching tiny frigates and T1 cruisers they could overwhelm the Band of Brothers (BoB) ship. That large ship would not be able to bring in reinforcements, because the framerate would decelerate for everybody in the area. Because they had a numerical advantage, per framerate, the goons had a net gain in maneuverability. As soon as a goon died, he picked up another disposable ship to immediately launch another kamikaze. With little investment of time and money but a guerilla strategy, they annihilated the Titan ship by “choking the guns of our enemies with our corpses.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 5-4 In the MMO, *EVE Online*, the GoonSwarm, represented as little dots, sends ships of thousands of unskilled players at the most powerful ships (and players) in the game—and they sometimes win, which has changed the nature of the game.

GoonSwarm rejected the usual markers of success and alliance strength, such as the kill-to-death ratio. Their tactics gave them a terrible score, but the legend of the GoonSwarm Alliance to win against the odds grew rapidly, eventually making it the most popular player group in *EVE Online*. Because GoonSwarm rejected the (previously popular) values of virtual property, rank and, score, it attracted and continues to enjoy a constant influx of new, inexperienced players who want to see battle immediately. GoonSwarm changed the game, ultimately becoming the largest guild. They are less and less, a band of griefers, however, but they did transfigure the gamespace in which they operate. A useful ambivalence plagued GoonSwarm players as they struggled to invent new means of organizing swarm behavior, bouncing blindly between historic successes and defeats:

We are a terrible alliance playing a terrible game, we failed to kill our major enemy because we couldn't co-ordinate with allies so we just retreated and lost 2 regions to them. They are now wiping out our allies in another part of Eve while we hold our dicks, the RSF has fallen apart (What's left of the R is shooting the F) and everyone knows that if BoB turn on us now, we are completely fucked. [...We risk] donation-drive inspiring levels of failure.<sup>14</sup>

The lure of the magic circle, of fantasy space, camaraderie, and ownership, tamed and consolidated GoonSwarm into a group of players not altogether different from normal players. However, the best way to understand what they did is in how they shifted what was considered to be a "normal player." It could be said that they ultimately succumbed to the same stereotypes they first set out to undermine. But in the process, they managed to open the game up technologically and socially. Through their avant-garde play, the game was able to absorb a more diverse influx of new players, and push them directly into engaging critically important in-game



actions, rather than drudging through a long training or trial process. Power was effectively distributed, at the expense of stability and continuity of guild dominance in the game. GoonSwarm eventually collapsed from within, when its guild leader disbanded the alliance in a fit of revenge as goons increasingly turned on him.

## Reviving and Reworking Dead Capital



Figure 5-5 A Situationist map playfully reinterprets the urban space of Paris.

The Situationists invented the *dérive*, literally “drifting,” through urban spaces. The Critical Art Ensemble dismissively stated several years ago that the “streets are dead capital.” If the streets really were “dead capital” (which they are not), if they are only an antiquated space for avant-garde politics, that would only mean that the streets might be reopened and remixed back into contingency and play anyway. The complicit avant-garde is comfortable playing with obvious, banal,

or dead concepts, and bringing them back to life, rather than just clinging to the most mythically radical ones. The *dérive* tactic was an attempt to establish new social and personal relationships in the city. To this effect, the Situationists prepared strange maps, like the one pictured above that formulate novel vectors for traversing spaces. Mirroring this cross-wiring was the small international group that comprised the Situationist International, having started in 1957 in Italy by Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, among others. Their idea was to treat urban media, people, and culture as if this social matrix were nature itself, unknown and pregnant with possibility. Guy Debord describes:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.<sup>15</sup>

Situationists documented *dérives* as a “psychogeography” of the city, combining photographs, reworked maps, and meticulous notation of their sensations and reactions to the world phenomena around them. The purpose of the *dérive* is playful and simple: to liberate people from perceived notions of what city life had to be like. And because city life is imbricated with technology, it requires technological literacy to experiment fully with new configurations. Extensive rules, games, and systems are necessary to counteract the commercial spectacle. Paradoxically, these arbitrary rules allow the novel and unforeseen to come into being. Meticulously designed anti-rules become tools for hacking into overly administered lives. If mass media is a

stupefying spectacle, the solution is not simply to destroy spectacle, which is impossible, but to hijack it and diffuse its power.



Figure 5-6 Commercial television and movie footage was critically remixed and détourned in the Situationist film, *Society of the Spectacle*.

Like Dadaists, Situationists cut-up and remixed art and media such as newspapers, paintings, films, and photographs. Their goal was not to realize a non-rational or non-binaristic way of thinking and communicating, as it was for Dada and the Surrealists. The Situationists wanted to find alternative methods of communications that were functional and sustainable. In his film *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord edited clips together from popular films, like those by Orson Welles, John Ford, with soft porn and TV commercials. According to the political avant-garde, all mass media is political, especially when it is framed as entertainment. Guy Debord argued that it is political because, "[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is

mediated by images.” The way it regulates social relationships makes entertainment political. For Debord, “[t]he spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any projected review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. [...] It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity.”<sup>16</sup> These lines come from Debord’s book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, which he read aloud as the soundtrack to the film of the same title. This *détournement* infused art with argumentation, speaking about the same media that it spoke through. The effect is that *The Society of the Spectacle* does not collapse into simple parody. The actors appear mildly tragic even as they are mocked. Spectatorship itself is rendered difficult to sit through the whole ninety-minute film, more so for contemporary audiences.

The tactic of *détournement* is complementary to the *dérive*. Where the *dérive* remixes social relationships as they exist in *space*, the *détournement* remixes social relationships, as they are mediated, whether it is through film, television, videogames, virtual worlds, or print advertising. The *détournement* is a precursor and more extreme forms of contemporary remix culture and culture jamming. Even through millions of remixed videos and games are online, this media is streamed *through* the network, its architectures remaining safely static in the background. The avant-garde’s function remains to discover novel methods of meta-analysis and meta-practice that ask whether these networks themselves may be felt, used, seen, and played with differently.

The Situationists had learned from history and tried to avoid the trap into which Dada had supposedly fallen (according to historical critics). Dada sought to revolutionize life but ended up revolutionizing art, because in the most extreme cases, audiences were disempowered or stupefied and only the entertainment

industry could pick up the new avant-garde strategies. Rather than starting with art, the Situationists began by playfully hacking entertainment media and making it political. In doing so, the Situationists hoped to fan the social sparks of Dada into more sustainable political fires by framing politics through play, and through reworked popular entertainment. To play a Situationist game was to make real choices according to Debord:

The situationist game stands out from the standard conception of the game by the radical negation of the ludic features of competition and of its separation from the stream of life. In contrast, the situationist game does not appear distinct from a moral choice, deciding what ensures the future reign of freedom and play.<sup>17</sup>

The Situationists may have wished for a total revolution of the dominant order—of rational thought, human language, and sense itself—but they also realized that if they directed their energies into a hybrid game sucking into its magic circle as many dimensions of contemporary life as it could, then it might transform life by degrees and in fits and starts. It could occur along varying scales from the immediate and local to the international. They developed pronounced strategies of social action often cited today in media studies. Hybridizing theories from various disciplines: aesthetics, ethics, anarchism, urbanism, strategic warfare, play and games, the Situationists concocted elaborate ways to hack reality through play, ways that are being continuously iterated upon today.

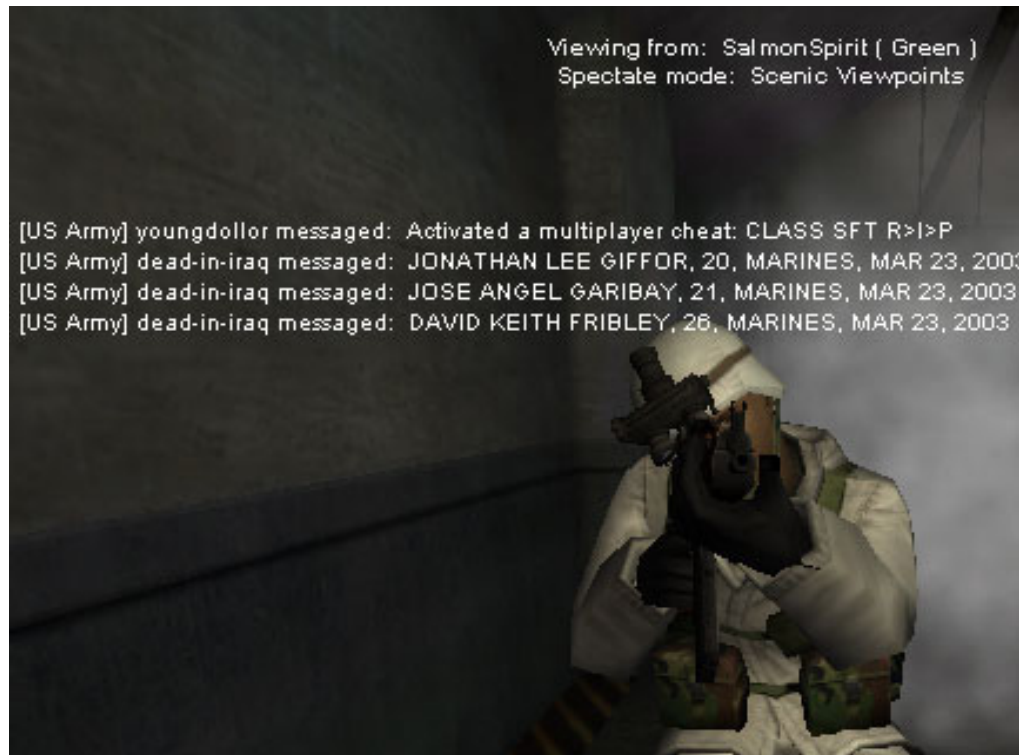


Figure 5-7 DeLappe performs *Dead in Iraq*, texting names of actual people who died in the Iraq war, from within the game *America's Army*, a recruiting tool of the American Army.

Joseph DeLappe détourns the networked shooter game *America's Army*, which was actually produced by the army. DeLappe logs into the networked shooter game *America's Army* and texts to nearby players the names and ranks of every U.S. soldier killed in Iraq. This transforms a recruiting tool into a memorial. The title of the piece is *Dead in Iraq*, which was begun in 2006 and is ongoing. Typing each fallen soldier's name, age, service branch, and date of death takes dozens of hours and as of May 2008 DeLappe has input a total of 4,002 names. At first, players might assume DeLappe is a simple griever, but he is not wielding any technical power. He is only reciting the names of the war dead. DeLappe is not denying the symbolic importance of these names, but leveraging it to infuse meaning into what the game is simulating. He is turning the game back on itself and reminding players of the connection between the videogame, the military, and the materiality of war. Since it

enforces a hybridized vision, such performances hold the potential to counteract the kind of radicalized and singular vision of other hybrid events, like the trashing of the Millennium Square Garden.

DeLappe tapped into a unique quality of *America's Army*, injecting difference into the smooth action of its military logic. In *America's Army* every player logs into the American team and from their perspective the avatars of themselves and their teammates are rendered as American soldiers. From their perspective the opposing team is always the terrorists. However, from the opposing team's perspective the situation is reversed, and they are playing as the Americans. The explanation is simple: the Army didn't want to produce a game in which international players could kill Americans. To play *America's Army* is to become an American and a killer. DeLappe recoups difference by dropping his gun and reading the list of dead until his teammates assassinate him or enemies kill him because he is defenseless. According to DeLappe, it is a "fleeting, online memorial" and counter-recruiting "cautionary gesture," as physical death is overlaid virtual death. The artist states:

part of the reason we are so disconnected from what is going on in Iraq is that we consider the responsibility towards mourning to solely fall on the shoulders of the loved ones and family members of the soldiers who have given the ultimate sacrifice. [...] This is my way to take personal responsibility towards mourning the deaths.<sup>18</sup>

The artist takes upon the mourning role, but doesn't allow it to spread very easily. Other complicit works are more hybridized in this way. They mix categories beyond purposeful inaction and text chat, but enable players to actually do things in response. They enable players to use procedures, spaces, identities, and so on, that

the artists leave open and negotiable by the nearby recipients of the event. These show us how a shared social gamespace may become a site that is malleable to avant-garde politics. A critical weakness in DeLappe's performance is the fact other players have nothing to do in response, except watch and interpret. As expected, this often garners a quick, negative dismissal. Aware of this pattern, the Situationists tried to leave their works open when they could to mitigate against stupefaction and easy negation. For example, in an early screening of Debord's film, *The Society of the Spectacle*, it closed with, "We live like lost children, our adventures incomplete..." followed by 24 minutes of darkness. During this time, the audience was left to deal with this tenuous ending. It was a dare. The soft ending of dark silence called forth social exchanges in the audience who had to reframe the situation for themselves.

## **Redistributing Power in Technoculture**

The participation afforded in today's videogames may, in fact, present a similar problem as mass media did to the Situationists—merely simulating meaningful remixes and transformative social exchanges. In 1991 Brenda Laurel wrote *Computers as Theatre*, mapping out the new dramatic and participatory possibilities that computation could generate.<sup>19</sup> She has argued for transparency in interaction design in order to lift the burden from the user, and allow greater divergence in how technoculture realizes itself. In "Coda: Piercing the Spectacle," contributed to the lengthy anthology, *The Game Design Reader* (2006), Laurel speculates on the avant-garde possibilities of game design.<sup>20</sup> She suggests that we should:

examine the roles of our player-characters, and see how we *enact* the spectacle—of wars and fast cars, of crimes and disasters and other fare of the



evening news, of heroic acts in magical worlds so far from the actual agency in our daily lives as to engage us wholly in alternate worlds of possibility.<sup>21</sup>

According to Laurel, this enormous fictional power may less us to be *less* politically engaged as it overwhelms any possible agency in our daily lives. She continues:

[Playing videogames] I can kick ass, but I am helpless speck compared to the interests and institutions that define the realities of my life. That is what both games and schools are teaching us. And both of them are wrong. [...] Just as games can entertain us to enact the Spectacle, they may enable us to enact its converse. Situationists call this sort of reversal a reconstruction. Game designers have it in their power to reconstruct notions of personal awareness, choice, and agency in ways that might seriously disturb the consumerist ethos that has been prepared for us.<sup>22</sup>

This reconstruction is becoming evident in remix culture, which this avant-garde exaggerates and amplifies. ARGs offer a scalable and sustainable solution to a problem for which the Situationists never found durable answers. This is possible because the contemporary polis is increasingly manifested through virtual domains and spaces. Contemporary *dérives* can integrate the virtual in their remixes. Instead of drifting through cities only physically, ARGs allow players to drift digitally through the city's communication technologies, adding another information layer to their practice. The Situationists occasionally used walkie-talkies in their urban *dérives*, and today such augmentations proliferate every year, in the form of PDAs, mobile phones, and handheld game devices, such as the modded Nintendo DS. As the polis is more intimately woven through technology, it becomes difficult to distinguish a *dérive* from a *détournement*. The Situationists remixed films,

newspapers, and television, an ingenious move two generations ago, but a move that is now commonplace with technocultural artifacts like Google Maps, retweets, YouTube Poop, and the like. ARGs push the envelope of remix culture even further, leading to practices that may become commonplace tomorrow. If grieving is on the absolute extreme end of remix culture, the tactics of the hybrid political avant-garde seem less alienating for the mainstream. Most of us do not feel as threatened by tactics of ARGs, in which transit systems, emails, telephony, and so on are absorbed into an uncontainable game.



Figure 5-8 Virtual graffiti in *Velvet Strike* interventions changes the nature of the networked multiplayer shooter game *Counter Strike*.

*Velvet Strike* (2002) by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre, and Brody Condon is a scalable game intervention that anyone can join in and iterate upon. The artists performed the work themselves, but also concocted “intervention recipes,” so

that anyone could reproduce it and improvise. These tactics enable players to hijack the networked shooter game, *Counter Strike*. Instead of gunning down terrorists, players become turncoats. They release hostages captured by their own team. Instead of coordinating tactics with their squad through the in-game chat client, they casually converse about cooking. More devious tactics include kidnapping other players by inviting them into their vehicles. At first, these players assume that they are being driven to battle; eventually, it becomes clear that they are being taken to the middle of nowhere. They must commit group suicide to escape or slowly walk back. The *Velvet Strike* team explains through campy rhetoric:

Our mission is to seek out those who would attempt to propagate the vile seeds of strife and division upon the burgeoning fields of online entertainment. Why are these gaming environments so savage and ruthless? We all exist within these virtual domains and as members we have a duty to each other to coexist in a Utopian world free of hate and struggle.<sup>23</sup>

A tactic of *Velvet Strike* is to spray graffiti in the game world, images players place on the walls within gamespace. Kissing gay cops, antiwar slogans, and love messages, were pasted up along with references to contemporary issues about elections and conflicts cracked open the game with glimmers political actuality. Graffiti is not just a negation of whatever is there, but it is also a positive suggestion, as well. Baudrillard suggest that “[g]raffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds, there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of non-response enunciated by all the media.”<sup>24</sup>

Baudrillard’s description of a “non-response” has shifted to the sanctioned and allowed responses in games and networks. For example, Linden Lab itself

describes in-world protests in *Second Life* as “fads.” The complicit avant-garde spontaneously invents new communication models despite of these sanctioned models. Just because you can endlessly post YouTube videos and update Facebook profiles, doesn’t mean that is the only means of responding in technoculture. Rather than inventing new models of responding from radical positions, such as the radical political avant-garde, the complicit avant-garde hijacks the sanctioned means of response in technoculture toward collective and playful ends. Because their politics is mostly prefigurative and expressive, rather than radicalized, it is more forgiving and inviting. Such interventions deliver a milder jolt that multiplies relationships and lines of communication rather than rendering gamespace monstrous or chaotic. Debord describes this openness to renewal and foregrounding of bottom-up participation as key to a healthy remix culture:

Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon [...] The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding. It is a real means of proletarian artistic education.<sup>25</sup>

The Situationists may have advocated “cheapness” in hopes to eliminate the bar to artistic production (Duchamp and Dada merely lowered it), but at the time the only people who could participate in Situationist actions well educated and had the necessary tools, knowledge, and access to media to fully engage in it. The affordance of cheapness as heavy artillery now permeates technoculture.

Situationist paranoia concerning the all-consuming, non-responsive spectacle is inverted in the euphoria of ARGs. In an ARG every media stream is sucked into

the flux of play, nothing is too cheap, or out of bounds. The greatest difference between the ideology of ARG leaders, like McGonigal and the Situationists, is that the latter were motivated by their condemnation of consumer culture, of the ubiquitous and monolithic Spectacle. Showing signs of non-hybridity and radicalism, Debord believed in the absolute power of ilynx over social structure: "life cannot be too disorienting."<sup>26</sup> He believed it took chaotic energies to break through the spectacle: "the most urgent expression of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when they claim to represent freedom."<sup>27</sup> The problem is that we have historically experienced the spectacle as a deep crisis or reveled in it as a mindless festival. For this very reason, we need moderation and complicity in order to accept and develop languages and literacies of hybridity. As Debord advised, we must be more dialectical than the radicals of the present or the past:

It is, of course, necessary to go beyond any idea of mere scandal. Since opposition to the bourgeois notion of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Marcel Duchamp's] drawing of a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* is no more interesting than the original version of that painting. We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation.<sup>28</sup>

Negating the negation of non-response is exactly what ARG players are doing. Supercharged players search tirelessly for links and clues, fragments of meaning in virtual and physical spaces, and then, most importantly, they create their own media fragments as they play the game. They deconstruct and reconstruct the spectacle at the same time. This hunger for meaning overcomes the inertia of the spectacle. Situationists wanted "to wake up the spectator who has been drugged by spectacular images [...] through radical action in the form of the construction of situations [...] situations that bring a revolutionary reordering of life, politics, and

art.” A situation occurs when tradition and expectations are not adequate. A “situation” is a frame that cannot contain the new meanings and relationships forming within it. This leads to “a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment or ambience,” when the particulars of our environments and relationships vibrate and pullulate with vibrant possibility.



Figure 5-9 A website from the 22nd century created for the 2001 ARG, *The Beast*, depicts Jeanine Salla in “Metropolitan Living Homes.”

*The Beast* was conceived as a viral marketing campaign to promote Steven Spielberg’s and Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 film, *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* The film takes place sometime in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, and the game narrative of *The Beast* several decades later. The film *A.I.* questioned the meaning of humanity in a technoculture in which machines would become self-aware, emotional, and indistinguishable from

humans. The game had extended this fictional universe into our everyday one. The “rabbit holes” or hooks into the game were placed in posters and at the end of trailers for the film. There was an unusual credit for “Jeanine Salla, sentient machine therapist.” Those who noticed this detail could google her online where they would find fake company websites from the future selling lovebots or rogue android retrieval. In addition, physical media was planted, photos in public bathrooms in New York and Los Angeles and recordings of voice actors left in players’ voice mail. When anything from a rumored “lost” wallet in a trashcan to skywriting might be involved, it redefines what communication channels are open.

Through an odd array of clues and artifacts, *The Beast* seeded and spread in players’ collective imagination. The details kept circling around a mysterious death of Evan Chan. Evan’s personal website from the future begins with, “I was born in Shanghai in 2066. Both of my parents were professors at the University of Shanghai...”<sup>29</sup> Three primary mysteries were to be solved in total, weaving together a dozen subplots and almost 150 fictional characters. Because no person could handle this much information alone, players began gathering online talking about *The Beast*. People from various professions shared specialized knowledge, passwords, and hunches, spontaneously creating message boards and wikis to gather information. For example, the Cloudmakers group was founded on April 11, 2001 by Cabel Sasser, at the time a 24-year-old, Oregon-based computer programmer. Two days after Sasser set up Cloudmakers, there were over a hundred members, and, when the game ended two months later 7,000 had posted 40,000 messages.<sup>30</sup>

According to Microsoft and DreamWorks, producers of *The Beast*, over a million people played. Thousands of groups formed, growing and shrinking,

thriving, and dying off. Although each group generated its style of coordination, the Cloudmakers were the most organized and had the highest profile. The Cloudmakers created nearly 4000 artifacts including texts, images, Flash files, a number of websites and videos including a 130-page walkthrough guide. Elan Lee, one of the puppetmasters and web designers of *The Beast*, described the powerful nature of collective play that the game catalyzed in the public. He and other designers had created a range of puzzles that they predicted would take six months for players worldwide to solve. They solved every one of them in two hours on the first day.<sup>31</sup> They were “scary good and scary fast,” challenging Lee and other puppetmasters to keep meeting the thirst of mass potential.<sup>32</sup> They scrambled in real-time to remain just a step ahead of players from launch to final resolution. The puppetmasters would brainstorm of a new twist for *The Beast* in the morning and get it online by midday. Game designers and players repeatedly surprised each other with their ingenuity.

ARG designer and pioneer, Jane McGonigal places the burden on designers of ARGs to do their job well, so that players can play as creatively as possible. Yet, this view may be a legacy of the top-down social model that ARGs seek to unwork and rethink. “Puppetmasters” plan, author, and manipulate the game as it unfolds. They release information through various media channels at appropriate times. They monitor player-created wikis and message boards to push players to their maximum potential. McGonigal describes her relationship to players as a “call and response,” a pattern found in jazz and a variety of other musical forms, in which partners oscillate the lead, alternately reacting to the other’s improvisations. In ARGs, the game community constantly grabs at the lead, trying to take it back from the puppetmasters and run with it as an unruly swarm cloud. To reward and funnel the collective energy, the puppetmasters call forth increasingly sophisticated “power



plays,” which might include impromptu dramatic performances at public payphones, hacking the fake company websites, solving physics equations that would challenge NASA scientists, or pushing parade-sized inflatable objects through the streets as if they belonged on a mammoth game board.



Figure 5-10 Players of *I Love Bees* perform missions on public streets, redefining what happens there.

*I Love Bees* was another ARG on which Elan Lee collaborated. Lee wanted to test the limits of this genre, so he set out to create challenges that players would fail. As Lee tells it, a voice-actor contracted for the game would call a payphone chosen at random from a predetermined list of hundreds across America. Whoever answered would be given a password. Five seconds later the actor would call another payphone in another city and ask whoever answered for that password. To

Lee's astonishment, the player who answered the phone was actually able to give the correct password.<sup>33</sup> The players meticulously had formed a transmedial network by manning every payphone, armed with PDAs and laptops where they could instantly relay information received. Through hard fun, players achieved new ways of perceiving and putting into play the latent power of social networks. McGonigal explains:

Success in *The Beast* therefore required developing a kind of stereoscopic vision, one that simultaneously perceived the everyday reality *and* the game structure in order to generate a single, but layered and dynamic world view.<sup>34</sup>

A better term than stereoscopic vision is hybrid vision, seeing multiple realities in the one in which you are breathing. ARGs frame another nascent reality in the very spaces and media from which we socially construct normal reality. Through hybrid vision players see qualities of the game overlaid the qualities of the real world. The one is in the other. In an *alternate* reality, these games foster a need and framework to think and to act and interact in ways that diverge from everyday reality, but the trick is that they ask us to do this from within this same everyday reality of streets, email accounts, web surfing, and so on. The concrete is really there, but what it means and how we live with it is up in the air. ARGs constitute a reality-check on our experience of the everyday by mirroring back the everyday in a warped manner. The warping is itself in motion, like a rippling wave across the mirror.

Playful reality checking has surprising results that reorder mainstream commonsense. On 9/11/2001 the Cloudmakers (still chatting on their message boards, although *The Beast* game had ended several months earlier) began impulsively discussing the tragedy in a ludic way. Initially, expressions of shock and

grief dominated, but within hours other kinds of messages began popping up, reading: “We can solve the puzzle of who the terrorists are” and “We have the means, resources, and experience to put a picture together from a vast wealth of knowledge and personal intuition.” This sentiment as hubristic as it is empathetic. This line of discussion continued to grow until after several days moderators intervened, arguing that *The Beast* “was scripted. There were clues hidden that were gauged for us. It was \*narrative\*.... *This is not a game*. Do not go getting delusions of grandeur. Cloudmakers solved a story. This is real life.”<sup>35</sup>

The moderators were looking at these messages from a top-down, institutional worldview that only the intelligence and military communities could do anything meaningful in this situation. This mainstream political perspective does not wish to allow the polis to transform itself according to its own native impulses. To assume that average people could spontaneously do anything productive regarding 9/11 was considered highly delusional. Why is it so delusional? From a hybrid perspective, the reverse was true. The moderators were suffering from mainstream commonsense and groupthink. Why not try to do something, no matter how crazy it seems? The avant-garde reinvents the “practical.” The moderators were correct in an obvious way: *The Beast* was a plot scripted for average people to solve, and the attack a terrorist plot not scripted for average people to solve. But consider how many ways “solution” could be interpreted in this context? From the players’ perspective, 9/11 offered an irresistible opportunity for hard fun because it had a profound impact on how they framed everyday life in technoculture. The Real was splayed out in a pile of smoldering wreckage in New York. It wanted to get up and move around and do something. The Cloudmakers preemptively tried to co-opt 9/11—and drain its shocking, stupefying power—before it became a political kludge to scare the public into accepting the loss of rights, privacy, and bottom-up power,

through Orwellian laws, such as the Patriot Act, and by fear-mongering in general by politicians of all stripes. If 9/11 had been considered as a gaping opportunity to rethink our politics, to fundamentally play with our own shock and the Real, perhaps the national trauma wouldn't have been as usable as a wound that demands blood.

### **Shock as Kitsch in the Simulation Age**

As Lev Manovich touches upon in *The Language of New Media*, it is common for avant-garde tactics, once experimental, contingent, and open, to eventually propagate into mass culture where they close up, and become formulaic kitsch (not his words). The usually proffered example is how avant-garde techniques transformed ad marketing in the early 1960s, fomenting the “creative revolution,” in which, supposedly, it became conventional to break convention (the “convention” of spectacular consumption itself was not to be broken, however, only the illusion of its rupture). A generation before that, however, Nazi filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl, appropriated avant-garde techniques from filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein of communist Russia. Riefenstahl mediated Hitler into a sensationalized godlike figure using Eisenstein's style of associative editing, for example, along with a slew of other avant-garde inventions such as tilted perspective and high-contrast lighting. Since the WWII era, governments and corporations the world over have shocked populations both foreign and domestic using such methods. Power fantasies and public fears are equally preyed upon, reflecting and enlarging them into a self-consuming spectacle—all thanks to the new techniques of mediation the avant-garde has provided.



Figure 5-11 Nazi propaganda formalized media techniques that were once avant-garde in order to effectively shock and manipulate the German public.

The historical avant-garde committed a formal violence to traditional aesthetics in a way that made it easier for us to consume media that depicted the destruction of human life. Walter Benjamin called this process “aestheticizing politics.” Benjamin identified the phenomenon in Nazi Germany, observing in 1936:

Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a

degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic.<sup>36</sup>

The German public, exhilarated at midnight rallies, inflammatory radio speeches, arresting photography, and shocking films about the Jewish pestilence, could finally be orchestrated by strategies of the Nazi government. Unity was enforced by techniques of mass communication, wiping out differences between true Germans and their unique provincial histories. The Aryan self-image was condensed through a flow of striking imagery, soundscapes, and epic mythology. The German man was montaged with the ideal machine, the German woman montaged with conquered, purified nature, both strong and beautiful. This internal image of goodness was polarized against the ugly, flipside of reality. Every problem, every threat to the perfect German image, was found in a hideous composite: the subterranean and wormlike Jew and the feminine and beastly communist, gushing her filthy blood in spirit, tongue, and sexuality. No culture has been more modern, more binary, more shock-fueled, and more categorical in its national image, than Nazi Germany. Aesthetics dominated politics, the pure, internal image contrasted in every way from the outer image.



Figure 5-12 Seen through the lens of gamespace, the actual reality of war is rendered as a detached, phantasmagoric, and ultimately, entertaining, method of destruction.

As Benjamin put it, “[a]ll efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.”<sup>37</sup> Over the course of the 20th century, the aesthetics of war have become even more dramatic and accessible through television. Hal Foster, a media and art critic, recalls the compelling images of the first Gulf War:

Such was the CNN Effect of the Gulf War for me: repelled by the politics, I was riveted by the images, by a psycho-techno-thrill that locked me in, as smart bomb and spectator are locked in as one. A thrill of techno-mastery (my mere human perception become a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and to destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my subjecthood.<sup>38</sup>

Foster was describing another wave in the aestheticization of politics. It became normal to witness a “The Fall of Baghdad” not as the bombing of a particular place teeming with people, but as a detonation of a gridded sector of gamespace in the night. Military action became more sanitized, yet more destructive at the same time. The first Gulf War (1991-1993) was labeled the “Nintendo War,” because it provided spectacular high-tech entertainment framed as a videogame. Baudrillard famously



claimed that, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," that the U.S. was fighting a "virtual war" constructed with satellite images and networks, procedurally managed by computer banks, while the Iraqis tried fighting a "traditional war" coordinating intelligence based on ground presence and human perception. The two sides "never really met" and deaths were so lopsided that Baudrillard called it "an atrocity masquerading as war." Although videogame enthusiasts dislike the label of "Nintendo War," it morbidly indicates that videogames have achieved a prominent cultural status in which reality is filtered through our experiences of videogames. For example, a soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from the second gulf war described how he constantly relives the experience, "This time, it's more traumatic than it was the first time, cause the first time, it was like a video game. It was like, 'Oh wow, cool. It happened.' It doesn't hit you until you're back here and everything just downloaded and you're trying to process it."<sup>39</sup> The videogame, and not film, or television, has become the model for framing the unbelievably shocking, the Real, as well as global, geopolitical conflict. Shock has become a familiar trope. We recognize shock as it hails us in entertainment, especially videogames. Shock interpellates us into surging active agents in the midst of a hypersimulated reality. A day after allied forces marched into Iraq in the second gulf war, Sony trademarked the phrase, "shock and awe," so it could become a title of a PlayStation 2 game.<sup>40</sup> Sony eventually dropped the plan to avoid negative press.





Figure 5-13 Fights scenes commonly use camera shake and rapid, disorienting cuts to evoke the feeling of mildly shocking danger, as in the *Bourne Identity* franchise.

New media theorist, Mark Hansen, senses a ground-rhythm of shock permeating all of technoculture. Hansen traces it to the historical avant-garde.<sup>41</sup> A steady flow of irregular shocks orients popular audiences, like the establishing shot and soundscape of film. Without a continual drip of jerks, buzzes, and montages, we simply wake up. A counterintuitive claim: for media to remain immediate and immersive it has become hypermediated and reflexive by degrees. Mike Featherstone in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* postulates that shock is now, also counter-intuitively, a “media lubricant” required for smooth and transparent digital consumption.<sup>42</sup> Every ad, every web page, every frame of a videogame, has to, at least mildly, jolt and jar the viewer, in order to excite and stupefy her enough to take in the mediation.

Shock has become a guideline consisting of blips, bumps, and buzzes that we actively seek and use in order to orient ourselves in a nauseatingly vast ocean of media. For example, fight sequences are now saturated with blur, shake, and jump-

cuts, to the point where feeling the flow of the action overwhelms causal continuity. You get a shifting sense of who's winning moment-to-moment, even if the exact sequence of blows and blocks is a blur, popularized through the *Bourne Identity* franchise. Shock is something that we seek in order to determine meaning and significance of media artifacts quickly. It might be logically disorienting, but it is sensually orienting and grounding. Shock has stabilized into a reliable stream of disturbances that both irritate and soothe at the same time, becoming an odd, familiar kind of discomfort. Audiences are accustomed to a random static of zaps that prove our experience of media is real because that feeling is undeniably real: our eyes are *really* fluttering around, ears are *really* swimming, thumbs are *really* twitching, and brain is *really* racing, all to keep the experience glued together into one coherent frame of control.



Figure 5-14 Shock and awe of war in popular media is presented as disturbing on the one hand, but also consumable and trivial, on the other.

Excessive shock has the same effect that it always has: numbing, disorienting, and traumatizing. The military campaign of “shock and awe” began months before the first bombs were even dropped on Baghdad. It was psychological warfare through media. “Shock and awe” was a term invented by military strategist Harlan Ullman in 1996, and later picked up by Donald Rumsfeld to describe the impending overwhelming force that promised to decapitate the military and demoralize the population of Iraq. The term spread in the media to eventually equate with the entire campaign. Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* describes the neoliberal strategy of Milton Freeman, which dictates that every crisis affords a “natural” shock-and-awe that softens populations for manipulation. Crisis and shock are recast as prime opportunities for corporations or governments (regardless if “liberal” or “conservative”) to move into the affected nation to advance their particular interests.<sup>43</sup> Klein continues: “only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change” and once a crisis has struck it is “crucial to act swiftly, to impose rapid and irreversible change before the crisis-racked society slipped back into the ‘tyranny of the status quo’.”<sup>44</sup> A variation on Machiavelli’s advice that ‘injuries’ should be inflicted ‘all at once’.”<sup>44</sup> The shock doctrine is obvious to see when it is applied to foreign populations, but it is more difficult to see when applied domestically. Klein goes on to argue that it was the shock of 9/11 that led the American people to accept a war on terror and the loss of civil liberties that they would increasingly reject later. The shocking fluctuations of gasoline prices in 2008 were seized upon by oil companies to render off-shore drilling desirable, that is, until the 2010 BP oil spill—shocking public discourse back in another direction.

Due to mass assimilation of shock, Bürger was not optimistic about the prospect of regenerating the radical political avant-garde. In fact, he coined the term

“neo-avant-garde” to disparage all political art movements that came after Dada, such as the Situationists or the Happenings of the 1960s. Bürger suggested that such movements are always doomed to failure. He required the radical political avant-garde always to be defined in relation to the trauma inflicted by the machine age and the WWI:

All art that is more recent than the historical avant-garde movements must come to terms with this fact in bourgeois society. It can either resign itself to its autonomous status or ‘organize happenings.’ [...] But these attempts, such as happenings, for example, which could be called neo-avant-gardiste, can no longer attain the protest value of Dadaist manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former. In part this is owing to the avant-gardistes’ effects losing their shock value.<sup>45</sup>

If the political avant-garde has only one function: to reproduce the initial shock of mechanized death facilitated by modern industrialization—then subsequent avant-gardes would, then, indeed be impossible. If Bürger questioned the value of Happenings, he would certainly deny griefers as politically avant-garde, especially with regard to their reveling of shock. The legacy of academics demanding that the avant-garde be based on “opposition,” “criticism,” and “shock,” has handicapped understanding of the avant-garde, as Drucker and Foster have pointed out.

Appropriation by mass culture is supposedly the big death knell. However, once the political avant-garde is defined in terms of play rather than negation, which was the crux of the radical political chapter, we may shift our perspective and see popular culture and the avant-garde as symbiotic and constantly reacting to one other. It is by being complicit, that the political avant-garde can simultaneously confront, and

spread through, technoculture, reworking and overturning the kitsch and bludgeon of shock, from within the upset belly of the beast.

## **Détournement of Shock**

ARGs allow us to deconstruct not only potential crisis, but also the ways in which these crises are generated and sensationalized. They enable us to play with crises self-reflexively, boosting our resistance to shock manipulation by media and governments (regardless if it is in real or imagined crises). McGonigal states, “It can be hard to get people to think of worst-case scenarios because of fear and anxiety. In entertainment, we have a comfort level with crisis.” For many people it is common to blank out when thinking about running out of food, water, and energy in everyday life, because the scenario is so different from experience. When framed as a game, however, it is easier to work through the situation, as problems are broken down into smaller challenges and we have other players to network with. In the ARG, *Superstruct* in 2008, participants played out an apocalyptic future where half-dozen crises compounded each other. Griefers had developed their skills to the point that they could crash banks, satellites, and weather detection systems. Avian flu-like epidemics were spreading; famine threatened human extinction. Colleen Macklin claimed that the game “creates a platform to address issues set in the future. *Superstruct* is like a big, fun brainstorming session.”<sup>46</sup> *Superstruct* was sponsored by the Institute for the Future and is using the results to make predictions and prescriptions for companies and governments.



Figure 5-15 *World Without Oil* simulated the beginning of the end of a fossil fuel economy, but was really a game about the collective deconstruction of shock media.

In the 2007 ARG, *World Without Oil*, players collectively imagined what catastrophes (and potential opportunities) might arise when oil demand far surpasses the available supply. What calamities or wars could ensue? How will people in unprepared infrastructures cope? What new kinds of relationships will we develop in our local communities and environments? The puppetmasters of *World Without Oil* incrementally raised the fictional price of gas over the course of several weeks. National economies went into recession, then depression; until finally civil and international wars resulted. Creatively coping with these challenges, players produced in-game narratives in thousands of blogs, videos, images, and other media exploring this issue in thousands of ways. U.S. soldiers in Iraq blogged as if they were redeployed to protect the oil supply, and critics suggested that the government would probably pull their internet access to prevent blogging. Not only did players

constantly evaluate the possibility of each other's projections. Since these projections were media productions, and minor spectacles in themselves, players were also learning how the spectacle functions as they played, bent, and broke its rules. Other players with various kinds of expertise served as collective judges. Although there was no official goal or prize, players felt they had won when a critical mass of players accepted their projections. Players knew that they were "winning" when their little productions went more viral than others.

Our game structure gives people 'permission' to think seriously about a future they might otherwise avoid thinking about at all [...] As a result of the game, people are thinking about their neighbors and communities in new ways, and planting gardens, going to farmer's markets, using bicycles and transit and otherwise questioning their dependence on cheap, plentiful oil.<sup>47</sup>

This new, massively distributed production method makes the issue thinkable and workable for players. Players took pictures of dilapidated gas stations and cars abandoned on American highways as if these were common sights. They made videos teaching small-scale organic farming techniques for urban survivors of the food shortages. When so many different people with diverse personal histories, skills, resources, and localities converge on a topic, they gain a kaleidoscopic perspective that manages simultaneously to construct and deconstruct a spectacle. The spectacle becomes the subject, taking center stage, now with people watching it critically and collectively creating it.

The actual subject of *World Without Oil* had nothing to do with oil. It was instead about the mediated construction of perpetual crises. People weighed one another's exaggerations and insights as they played the game. The ecstasy of



communication was dissected, deflated, and reconstructed. In comparison, the blunt ignorance and sheer face of the actual spectacle was rendered alienating, horrific, and inert. Compared to what the players were doing as they created and critiqued one another's media, the constant "shocking" reports in normal news media of perpetual disasters in oil spills, famines, and despots, seem comical in their palpable lack of suppleness and self-awareness. Media that is critically remixed, or détourned, is its own demystifying agent. It falls apart just as easily as it comes together. It expresses meaning and calls forth emotions while simultaneously giving away all of its tricks. Viewers know what it is trying to do. The media is infected with too many subject positions for any one of them to overpower all of the others.

ARGs are currently played by early adopters, who have a higher degree of media literacy and sense of collective agency, than the social majority does anyway. These players are most likely already inoculated against spectacular manipulation through shock (recall the Cloudmakers positive audacity, rather than shock, in response to 9/11). The aim of every political avant-garde is to open up everyday life and reconstitute social reality. Just as cities, states, and nations have practice drills to prepare infrastructure for biological and nuclear attacks, civil society could do the same through ARGs: questioning, flexing, deflating, and opening itself to internal transformation. Why not? ARGs are sponsored and organized through the Institute of the Future or McDonalds, why not regularly and "traditionally" through bottom-up political actions, as well?



## Irony is Kitsch?



Figure 5-16 Does Schneemann's performance of *Interior Scroll* (1975) further objectify the female body as sexual vessel, or does it contribute to the liberation of women?

Can shock truly be ironic any longer? Where is the line between deconstructing shock and reveling in its reproduction? What is the difference between détournement shock and fetishizing shock? Depends who you ask. This question has arisen in myriad ways for several generations of avant-garde figures. When feminist art depicts nude women, they might be objectified “ironically,” and might seem “shocking” and provocative by academic audiences indoctrinated, trained, and eager to read them in that way. But a naked woman is still readable as liquid, titillating porn for the male gaze to relish and objectify. This is regardless of the artist’s intent, regardless if the photographed woman is brandishing a knife dripping with her own menstrual blood. It still reduces woman to void sexual vessel for the onlooker poised to read the image in that way. In fact, her “shocking” twist can make her objectification by the male gaze that much easier, or even freakier and hotter, as he can now subvert the intended subversion, and think, “yep, typical angry, crazy liberal woman.” Her symbolic violence toward the viewer, justifies, from the perspective of the male gaze, his symbolic violence in return.



Figure 5-17 Is Annlee of the collective remix work, *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a too ironic, or not ironic enough?

*No Ghost Just a Shell* is an ongoing work started in 2001 by Huyghe and Philippe Parreno. For a 1999 art project, the Parrenos bought the intellectual property of a female character, Annlee, from a Japanese animation company for \$428. Huyghe and Parreno invited other artists to use her in whatever way they wished in a collective remix project. Annlee doesn't even care how you spell her name, "You can spell it however you want!" Annlee became a linking chain that formed, "a community that finds itself in an image." Hal Foster criticized the collective work, asking "is the buying of Annlee a gesture of liberation or serial bondage?"<sup>48</sup> Is this *détournement* coming full circle? As we shift from spectacle culture to simulation culture, as Baudrillard has suggested that we have, artists must be careful not to delude themselves into thinking that ironic remixing is not just

another form of the familiar idiotic consumption. In *No Ghost Just a Shell* the media artifact is drained from the start. It's an empty vessel for collective domination and control for collaborators. To redress this paradox, the artists transferred copyright ownership of Annlee's intellectual property to the "Annlee Association," a legal entity purportedly "owned" by Annlee herself. One is reminded of Chatterbot, or any of the hundreds of simulated personas programmed to assert freewill and claim sentience. Isn't programming a procedural slave to assert its will to attain a selfhood the ultimate slave master fantasy?



Figure 5-18 Does *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* recirculate America's fetish for ironically shocking entertainment, or unravel the fetish?

Danny Ledonne's *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* (2005), allows players to reenact the Columbine school shootings of 1999 as the killers in a single-player, 2D role-playing game created with RPG Maker in the 8-bit style. It is massacre pastiche. Ledonne created it, according to his artist statement, as a "wakeup call" and "warning" to America. It is unclear how deep the shtick goes, whether Ledonne is as disaffected as he lets on. Ledonne conducted lengthy research about the event to better dramatize it, going so far as to appropriate media, such as video images from the shooting, photos of the killers' dead bodies, the cover of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, which inspired them, images of survivors and mourning families, and so on. According to Greg Costikyan, "the game-ness of it helps to cloak the horror."<sup>49</sup> The game has two realms, the real world and hell, crawling with enemies appropriated from *Doom*, a game allegedly played by the killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. To survive in hell the player has to have killed as many children as possible in the school level beforehand. Ledonne explained this design decision to *Wired* magazine: "It's a little joke—you have to be really, really bad to survive in hell."<sup>50</sup> A prominent videogame developer warned that anyone who condemns the game is "gutless" and several leading academics expressed similar sentiments, citing it as a key example of why games are "art" or "free speech" issue. Another developer Greg Costikyan, speaking for the game industry, claimed:

*Super Columbine Massacre* is controversial for one reason only: Because our culture continues to assume that games are "mere entertainment," that a game based on so horrific an event must *ipso facto* be in bad taste.<sup>51</sup>

What if Costikyan has it backwards? What if the problem with *Super Columbine Massacre* is not that it is a product of "bad taste"? What if it frames the Columbine Massacre more shock fodder for "mere entertainment"? What if the problem is that

technoculture is caught in a feedback loop of little transgression—shock—little transgression—shock...? It is not the subject of *Super Columbine Massacre* that is a harmful cliché, but the way in which it aestheticizes its violence. The Columbine Massacre was already sensationalized by mass media. The 24/7 news machine requires nutrients of never-ending crises: natural disasters, election fraud, war casualties, record unemployment, massacres, and so on.

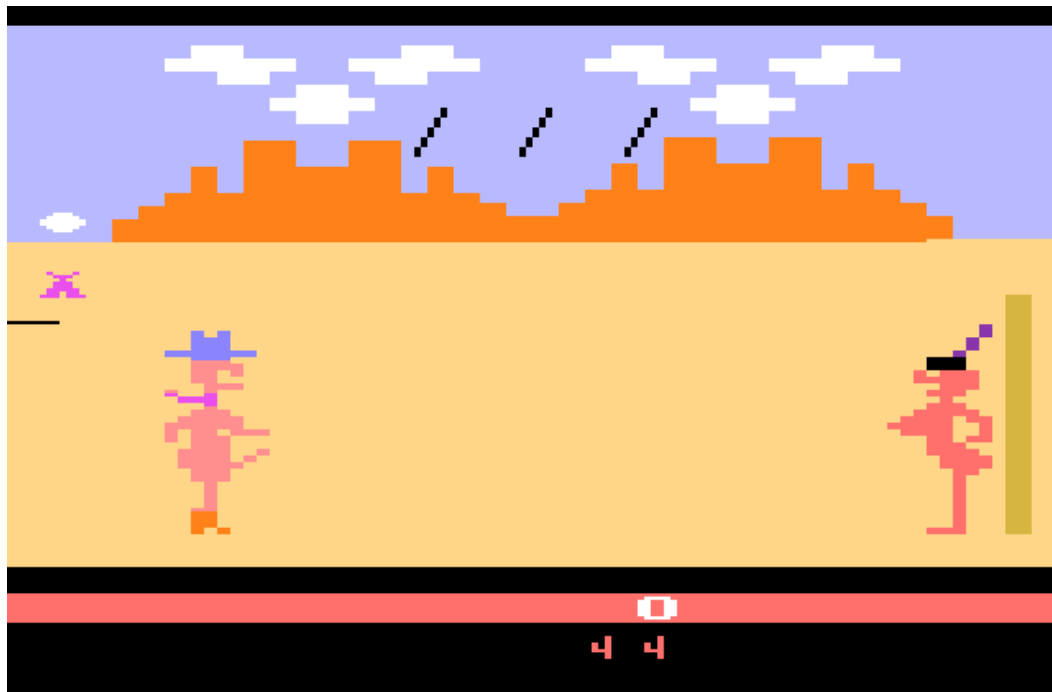


Figure 5-19 *Custer's Revenge* (1982) for Atari depicts 8-bit rape of a buxom Native American.

In 1982, *Custer's Revenge* for the Atari 2600 provided a Native American girl tied to a stake for the player to rape as General Custer. Similar to *Columbine Massacre*, it manifests a popular impulse within our culture of subversive titillation. It is naïve to think that a videogame is avant-garde in any way because it affords rape, murder, or torture, regardless if it retro and chunky, or high resolution. Even in all their 8-bit glory, they still strengthen the dominant trend of aestheticizing politics, of packaging shock into one more variant of a popular commodity. Politics

is increasingly aestheticized through videogames, and shock used as an orienting, syntactic device to convey meaning. If shock is used in art, it has to be used to reveal and reconfigure how meaning is itself constructed. For videogames, the political fight is not over the freedom of “expression,” as academics often believe. As outlined in the radical political chapter, the political battles are fought over mass and random access of the codes of control, whether they are technical, sensual, or social.

As a community, we have been preoccupied with the cultural acceptance of games as “speech” or “art.” In misguided attempts to strive at this goal, it has become conventional for artists and academics to try to “advance” videogames through shock tactics, most famously by tackling “serious” subjects like Catholic priests raping children, or name any kind of violent issue society faces. It is not that these subjects should remain taboo to videogames. It is not that videogames are somehow unequipped to present them adequately in ways that don’t collapse in easy irony or consumable shock. It is that for a videogame avant-garde to politicize these subjects they have to be aware of the larger technocultural trend that uses shock as a manipulation tool. Bootstrapping games to taboo issues is to imitate markets, and not in a way that reveals much about markets or games. If these subjects are addressed with games, this trend must be addressed, and itself détourned and unworked, as well.



Figure 5-20 Rather than sensationalizing massacre, *Hush* deconstructs the presentation of massacre itself, by rendering it as mechanistic and mundane as it is brutal.

*Super Columbine Massacre* could embody the subject of the massacre and be avant-garde by prying apart, rather than sealing shut, our fetish for control and violence veiled in a coating of protective irony. We may sympathize with victims in everyday life, but videogames teach us to identify with heroes, preferably, the antihero who struggles to realize his growing powers. Whether it is a plucky little plumber or maniacal psychokiller, we play to become the masters of gamespace, not become its victims—although we might willfully agonize toward mastery. If *Super Columbine Massacre* had positioned the player into the role of victim, a victim destined to die a non-dramatic death, for example, it would have opened up the loop for second-order play.



*Hush* (2007), designed by Jamie Antonisse and Devon Johnson, is also about a massacre, but it doesn't render it smoothly and ironically consumable. The player of *Hush* must keep her baby quiet, or marauding Hutu in Rwanda will find them. The act of playing and protecting is rendered mechanistic and oppressive connecting the player to the massacre in a way that is not dismissively over-sensational. As it stands, *Super Columbine* piques and satisfies our desire to be shocked, under the guise of cynical satire—perhaps the safest form of “criticism” in technoculture today. To sour its naughty, little, and low-fi thrill, boredom could be a tactic: focus on the foregrounding the ordinariness of the victims, like the game *Hush* does, perhaps a live feed from the Columbine school appeared when you fire; or inundate the player with media depicting the slow, tear-soaked aftermath rather than the sensationalized event itself. *Super Columbine* would have to render the very familiar ironic titillation unpredictable enough to open the experience to second-order play, where the player is left to struggle with conceptually orienting herself to the work continuously as she plays it. Then the work would be politicizing videogame aesthetics, and the media circus surrounding massacres and crises, instead of the reverse, using videogames to further aestheticize politics.

## Quotidian Utopias

Utopia is an antiquated concept in contemporary political discourse. When we hear “utopia,” images of massive, institutional social structures dominate. This is thanks to its fame as a literary genre, and writers such as Sir Thomas More, who coined the term, reviving the concept from Plato's *Republic*. The problem of utopia framed as a literary genre, is that it is something already written, already conceived, it is a law and a plan to be executed and followed. However, if we see utopia through contemporary technoculture, and present it as something in the process of

becoming, something messy and socially negotiated, always in play and always being reconfigured, then it regains relevance and vitality. Here, utopia is a process and attitude rather than a goal. Complicit politics reframes utopia as a banal and quotidian idea, giving it affordances of being something light, playful, moving, and participatory. This is how the complicit political avant-garde, such as Jane McGonigal, invokes the utopian mood, by blending art and politics in the magic circle in ways that are immanent, approachable, present and welcome.



Figure 5-21 Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked and served food to gallery-goers, fostering goodwill in a banal kind of micro-utopia in the installation/performance, *Untitled (Pad See-ew)*.

One way to knock the grandeur, and dust, out of utopia, while also rendering it plastic and immediate, is to think about utopias as temporary, and in miniature. The banality of evil is overturned with another kind banality. A celebrated contemporary artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija (pronounced “*Tea-rah-vah-nit*”) gained notoriety in his performance, *Untitled (Pad See-ew)* (1992, 2002), where he cooked Thai food as visitors ate and commiserated. Tiravanija installed a makeshift kitchen in a Soho gallery, replete with fridge, rice steamers, hot plates, tables, and stools. According to a review in *New York Magazine*, “it was disconcerting and thrilling to be this casual in a gallery, to go from passive viewing to active participation.”<sup>52</sup> Critics saw Tiravanija as manifesting micro-utopias in which no one quite knows what to do, but general good will overwhelms confusion, and the social group is both fluid and constructive. Nicolas Bourriaud, who first theorized this work as politically “avant-garde,” describes it as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”<sup>53</sup>

Hal Foster sees this current trend in political art as, “remedial work in socialization: come and play, talk, learn with me.” Foster is right in a way, but we shouldn’t too easily dismiss some real affordances that emerge in the lackluster banality of “remedial work.” Social relations can maneuver freely because of the assumptions that the structure of the experience is so innocuous and weak, at worst, and an annoying artistic indulgence, at best. Setting sights in immediate concerns, it can be successful, albeit on a micro-local, perhaps even idiotic, level. But success is success nevertheless, so why not take it where you can get it? Foster isn’t so open in his assessment:

Sometimes politics are ascribed to such art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society, as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community [...] Tiravanija rejects 'the need to fix a moment where everything is complete'. But surely one thing art can still do is take a stand, and to do this in a concrete register that brings together the aesthetic, the cognitive and the critical. And the formlessness of society might be a condition to contest rather than to celebrate in art – a condition to make over into the form for the purposes of reflection and resistance.<sup>54</sup>

Foster's critique echoes those who see alternate reality games as another manifestation of hipster culture, consumerism disguised as protest, or art. Senior editor of *Harper's Magazine*, Bill Wasik created the first "flash mob" in Manhattan in 2003 getting participants to gather in a retail store. It was actually a prank on the participants, as Wasik wanted to parody "hipsters" and critique the conformity of people wanting to be a part of "the next big thing" while, ironically, also wanting to seem nonconformist and transgressive. What Wasik and Foster overlook is the fact that people learning to spontaneously organize and converge is itself transformative of politics – that is if we think of politics through the avant-garde view rather than the traditional, top-down view. Foster is entirely right, that art can still "take a stand," and that it does in the more radical events and games. However, we should allow the avant-garde to diverge and be open to a diversity of approaches that might contrast with whatever our personal brand of political theory might be. The strength of complicit politics is that it can work its way into the existing technocultural system and transform it from within along subtler channels. They remix the everyday into marginally better structures where people feel they can both meaningfully bond with one another and collectively focus their will toward benign pleasure. Like an ocean undercurrent, sending wave after wave, this grinds its

targets down over periods of time. Complicit politics doesn't disrupt life from some radicalized, distant position from the major cultural trends. Complicity cloaks itself in banality flying under the radar, sweeping into the flow of everyday life, reconfiguring it bit-by-bit and play-by-play.

Anthropologist of ritual and performance, Victor Turner, applies Csíkszentmihályi's notion of *flow* to social groups. Turner uses flow in a dichotomy with *reflexivity* to understand the back and forth of social groups into and out of self-conscious states:

ritual, ceremony, carnival, festival, game, spectacle, parade, and sports event may constitute on various levels and in various metalanguages. The group or community does not merely "flow" in unison at these performances, but, more actively, tries to understand itself in order to change itself. This dialectic between "flow" and reflexivity characterizes performance genres: a successful performance in any of the genres transcends the opposition between spontaneous and self-conscious patterns of action.<sup>55</sup>

ARGs, flash mobs, and all the "remedial work in socialization" of social artists, and other complicit political work, iterates on the parades and sporting events that we already know. Perhaps that is why the complicit avant-garde is so distasteful to critics who only accept more radical work. Group flow and group reflexivity are not in opposition, but swing back and forth, and through the collective. Collective flow and collective reflexivity do not dominate one another, but move back, forth, and through one another, like weather fronts. The multitude is aware of itself as such (recall a sporting event when the scale of the cheering crowd is awe-inducing and incomprehensible in scale); but the multitude also surprises itself, occasionally

stampeding or fomenting energies into spontaneous patterns that could swing creatively or destructively.

An individual playing an average “well-designed” videogame while in the flow will become a better player (in context to that game and others like it), as increasingly complex challenges keep her engaged. Social groups playing an ARG will follow a similar trend toward greater complexity, but can only do so by swinging back and forth between reflexivity and flow, and by using the affordances of new media. Individual players playing an ARG quickly become perplexed with dead ends, confusing leads, or too much information. Their personal experience might actually be similar to playing a formal avant-garde videogame, as when their email inbox is suddenly flooded with hundreds of emails. An individual playing an ARG must reach out to others participating via wikis, IRC channels, email, personal networks, etc., to work collaborate toward solutions to the massively distributed puzzles. For the individual to flow into the group, reflexive work must be done beforehand. This occurs collectively as many individuals are going through similar experiences that seem utterly impossible and incomprehensible from their unique and limited perspectives. In order for the group to regain flow, collectively agency and leadership passes from person to person according to the immediate action needed. In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky analyzes how as a society is transitioning from a top-down institutional power to bottom-up and power thanks to how individuals are increasingly enabled to spontaneously form up through scalable networks:

every institution lives in a kind of contradiction: it exists to take advantage of group effort, but some of its resources are drained away from directing that effort. [...] We now have communications tools that are flexible enough to

match our social capabilities, and we are witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that takes advantage of that change. [...] The current change in one sentence, is this: most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done.<sup>56</sup>

Shirky goes on to claim that it is not so much that society is changing, but that new technologies are allowing us to manifest more of what we already do in terms of collective sharing, many-to-many communication, and scalable collaboration. The “cognitive surplus” that collective efforts like Wikipedia harness is evidence of only a small fraction of what is coming down the pike according to Shirky. Technoculture does not fully understand what the new potential forms of mass social agency new media is making possible. This discrepancy is exactly what ARGs and flash mobs redress in a celebratory, wasteful, and festival-like fashion. These are flash forward visions of a potential political future. Appearing as idiotic entertainment, they still manage to restructure how social capital is circulated and how collective power is conceived of and constructed. The less radical purity and overt criticality that we demand of *complicit* politics, the easier it can spontaneously arise. ARG designers and players are still working out how this all might work. This kind of politics aims toward a moment when professional puppetmasters are no longer needed to begin the call-and-response narrative, which is a fantasy of Jane McGonigal. This kind of politics aims to realize a day when a popular and established artist is not needed to cook up Thai food in a set aside place to manifest a quotidian, fleeting, and tasty micro-utopia—but any pedestrian on the street will carry that possibility.

A complicit political avant-garde never stops drawing upon institutional and traditional politics to reinvent itself. For example, digital military logic renders the

planet into a mega space in ever-sophisticated ways—way begging for détournement. One of the most audacious ARGs actually predates the first one that caught the spotlight, *The Beast*, by forty years. *The World Game: Integrative Resource Utilization Planning Tool* was created in 1961 by Buckminster Fuller. The game draws in the entire planet, its cultures, materials, climates, and so on, into its magic circle. Theoretically, it is a game that incorporates all natural, technological, and social systems. Fuller studied the war games of NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command) and similar simulations at the U.S. Navy War College. From these, it occurred to him to create “peace games,” that like war games, are a comprised of a matrix of diverse data sets to come up with composite pictures of reality. Like war games, peace games expand the theater of gamespace in all possible dimensions and sciences. The difference is that peace games are played toward global utopia, rather than a global military domination by one nation or an alliance of nations.

The descendants of the war games that inspired Fuller, have inspired a surge of other media works, such as the eponymous film, *War Games* (1983). In military and intelligence circles, they have grown orders of magnitude more complex in succeeding decades. The Synthetic Environment for Analysis and Simulations (SEAS) currently in use by Homeland Security and the Department of Defense “is now capable of running real-time simulations for up to 62 nations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and China. The simulations [scour the web, gobbling] up breaking news, census data, economic indicators, and climactic events in the real world, along with proprietary information such as military intelligence. [...] Each has about five million individual nodes representing things such as hospitals, mosques, pipelines, and people.”<sup>57</sup> The “Sentient World Simulation” will be a “continuously running, continually updated mirror model of the real world that can be used to predict and



evaluate future events and courses of action.”<sup>58</sup> In ensuing decades of iteration, global war games will be only more invasive, extravagant, the reality outstripping our imagination in the present day. It is there that the affordance of being complicit shines through, where appropriating and gently bending militaristic vision toward peaceful visions, proves more helpful than full on challenges to the totalizing and reductively procedural militarized vision of the world. The more overpowering military simulations of controlled peace and annihilation becomes, the greater the need for a complicit avant-garde to intervene in these systems through seductively banal, celebratory, and entertaining means.

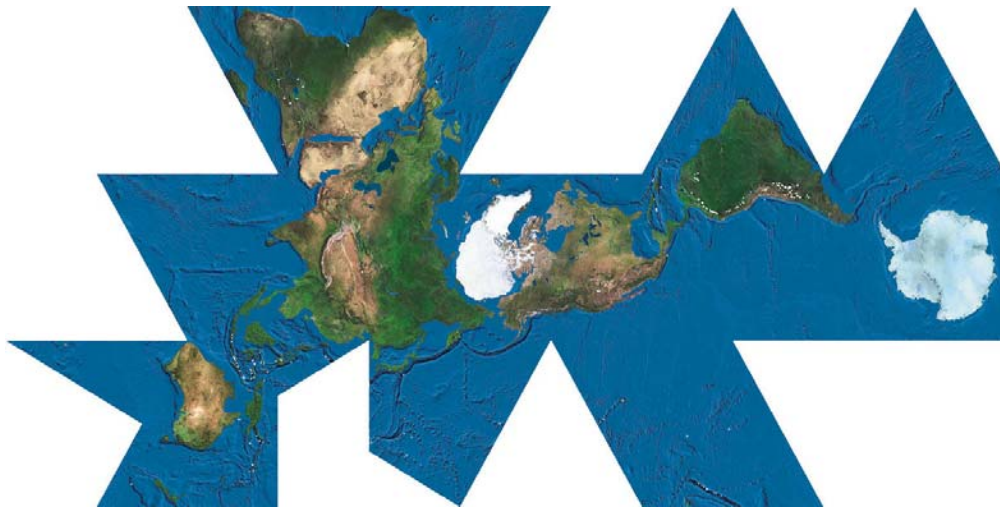


Figure 5-22 The Dymaxion Map from Fuller's *World Game* (1961) renders continental landmass contiguously so that the geopolitical world is conceptually more integrated.

Fuller's appropriation of military concepts and strategies mirrors Debord's study of Clausewitz, who he appropriated to elaborate Situationist strategies. Clausewitz famously said that "war is not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means." From this Debord reworked the concepts of politics and warfare to understand new media. Similarly, Fuller didn't just imitate global simulations of

nuclear holocausts and war games, but reconfigured them through a kind of détournement, transforming how they modeled the world and how they interpellated players. For example, to visualize gamespace in a way that fosters multilateral and holistic thinking about geopolitics, Fuller designed the Dymaxion Map, which minimizes spatial distortion while allowing all the continents to be drawn contiguously. The map emphasizes geographic continuity rather than national borders and spaces to be defended with deadly forces. Rather than playing toward domination, the challenge of the game was to have as many people on Earth have the highest quality of life possible. Collectively, players would, “make the world work for 100% of humanity in the shortest possible time through spontaneous cooperation without ecological damage or disadvantage to anyone.”<sup>59</sup> Fuller’s approach to governance and social problem solving was to frame the earth as a massive “ship” driven by a collection of forces rather than a single pilot, because the solution should be “something that was accessible to everyone, not just the elite few in the power structure who thought they were running the show.”<sup>60</sup>

Wholly in line with Fuller’s futuristic style of scientific thinking, his vision reached decades beyond his present era. The obstacles in realizing *World Game* at the time of its invention were incredible. What communication technology could handle all the many-to-many exchanges? How could a critical mass engage in a *World Game* about the actual world in real-time? To play the game effectively and meaningfully, thousands of streams of geopolitical information would have to be integrated into one system. The game required innumerable streams of information and would have to incorporate these vastly different kinds information into one meaningful magic circle. The U.S. intelligence community, at the time, was just getting a handle on similar totalizing simulations, but even theirs was “simpler” than Fuller’s design, because they were concentrating on how to maintain an ensure American

domination and unilateral survival, not how to ensure global prosperity and peace. Through baby steps over the course of decades, the complicit avant-garde stumbles toward Fuller's vision. In the 1980s, *World Game* was played on basketball court-sized maps tracking and visualizing an array of real-time data including many from the original design including: birthrates, famines, death-rates, armed conflicts, supply and demand of foodstuffs, rate of deforestation, etc.

During Fuller's lifetime and beyond his death, *World Game* has linked up a growing body of affordances inherent to new media (this is especially so, if we consider that he began prototyping the game in analog form on pen and paper in 1927). Several contemporary versions have been deployed such as *Spaceship Earth: The Game*, an MMOG with Celia Pearce as lead designer, produced by the Buckminster Fuller Institute. Fuller was sensitive to presenting complex systems of information in meaningful ways that were not overwhelming. This is why he wished to use the cultural convention of "game." In that vein, *Spaceship Earth* uses the affordance of zooming in and isolation of data points and geographic areas, as well as the zooming out to see the entire system abstracted as a whole both geographically as one big Earth, and as one big system. As a scenario is played in the simulation, participants attempt to "deploy it in the real world and are rewarded for the number of individuals they are able to reach with their planet-sustaining solutions." For example, if global warming is isolated as one big game challenge, people can unwork and worm through it from a scattershot of angles. They can play with the information in ways that are expansive and collective, communal and local, or private and small. The challenge is scalable to adjust to people's available resources to achieve alternate kinds of interpretation and various levels of impact. Banal utopia games, like *Spaceship Earth*, can absorb and remediate other games, such as *SuperWeed* (where seed bombs are thrown into dirt patches throughout the

city), because that smaller game is considered just another stream of information to track. Because *Spaceship Earth* has the potential to incorporate massive amounts of hard data, it can theoretically integrate its simulation into the everyday life of players, responding to their estimated collective carbon footprint, or to the calories one player has burned in the last 30 seconds. This goes beyond the globally expansive, and personally invasive, ARGs like *World Without Oil* or *Superstruct*. It is beyond what we have even begun to imagine, except, at least in thought experiments, such as Jesse Schell's scenario of the "Gamepocalypse." WWO and *Superstruct* simulate dystopian scenarios and allow players to fudge data as they collectively narrate stories about the apocalypse. It is worlds harder to design games around real, live data, while at the same time maintaining a critical mass of participation and creativity. In the big scheme of things, individuals feel so unimportant, their carbon footprint so insignificant, for example. And this is exactly where the collective aspects kick in, where the goal may ostensibly be about carbon, but it is always about what you are doing with other people.

The complicit political avant-garde might ride the waves of markets, governments, and militaries, but from within these waves, they spread and avail freshly pried forces among average people to sense and to leverage. They redistribute technocultural agency and the propensity for spontaneous collective actions. They do not try to build up some new, massive, bureaucratic, political orders, or a literary utopia of laws. We should evaluate Fuller's *World Game* or Pearce's *Spaceship Earth*, not by whether they "change the world." That skews their actual purpose. That metric looks at them from the perspective of the traditional political order, or, from the perspective of more radical avant-gardes. The metric by which the complicit avant-garde should be gauged is according to how it empowers people to spontaneously and meaningfully function in scalable groups—which often

appears banal to avant-garde radicals, or mainstream political views that can't see the transformations taking place beneath its feet. When it surprisingly aggregates, sending our "politics" adrift, the effect of the complicit political avant-garde is not unlike the upsurge of a natural disaster.

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59 Gabel, Medard. "Introduction to Buckminster Fuller's World Game." (2009),  
[http://www.bfi.org/our\\_programs/who\\_is\\_buckminster\\_fuller/design\\_science/world\\_game](http://www.bfi.org/our_programs/who_is_buckminster_fuller/design_science/world_game).

60 Ibid.

## CHAPTER 6: NARRATIVE FORMAL: MAKING THE STONE

### “STONY”

#### Braid



Figure 6-1 *Braid* reinterprets and foregrounds classic narrative conventions of the platformer genre, opening up how players engage them and why.

What if at the end of *Super Mario Bros.* it was revealed that the princess was terrified of you the entire time? Scrambling from castle to castle, she sought refuge in the arms of her real lover, Bowser, just to evade you, a mass murderer, idiotically stomping all those innocent Goombas and Koopas? Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) does something like that. Time and space are remarkably linked, folded, and reversed, in the micro and momentary, and macro and hourly scale. It's a platformer puzzle game in which the player controls the flow of time, but how it's controlled

changes. In one level, walking forward makes time move forward (boulders fall), but walk backwards and time moves backwards (boulders float up into the sky). The game draws from the archetypal story of hero saving the princesses, but knocks the story out of its familiar pattern at every angle.

*Super Mario Bros.* invented a play structure now universally recognized: run to the right, as you would flip through a children's fairytale, to go save a princess. Its structure is unilaterally focused to propel players into the flow of action, not break from or reflect on that flow. *Braid* borrows this same narrative-mechanical structure, but bends and cracks it to reveal the internal assumptions and mechanisms that hold it together. The cartoon look and logic get less cartoony, more excessively detailed, baroque, and undigested. *Braid* oozes with a slightly nauseating, overflowing, and painterly lushness, which arrests vision as eyes try to saccadically flicker over the screen. This nicely contrasts the superflat aesthetic of *Super Mario Bros.*, in which the eye smoothly skates across swaths of monochromatic shapes. Instead of moving forward through levels efficiently, gameplay requires looking backwards, and backwards again, lingering over the past and past mistakes. Who the protagonist, Tim, and the object of his affection, the endangered princess, are, remains unclear. Equally confusing is what it is exactly that these people want, and what they have done up till this point becomes increasingly suspicious. In contrast, Mario and Princess Toadstool are empty vessels in *Super Mario Bros.* hollowed out to let the player step in and embody unilateral action. Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics* that visually abstracted characters are easier to project ourselves onto because we can fill in the details. The same is true for characters with hollowed out and abstracted narratives. At the end of *Braid*, the player realizes the goal she was chasing could never be realized—the last scene from the ending that is easiest to achieve is the princess running away from the player and jumping into another

knight's arms. The player's character is revealed to be a psychotic stalker. Collect eight hidden stars throughout the game and a second ending is unlocked. An atomic bomb explodes, and the final image is the princess chained up in the night sky. If the player wins, the world burns.

*Braid* foregrounds archetypal patterns in games by pushing them further, or pulling them closer, than we would like. We can control time and space, but can't prevent the girl we want from hating us. The familiar feeling of finding a correct distance is awkward to achieve. We have too much power, but also too little. It's hard to tell if the "message" of the game heavy-handed or whimsical? Subtle cues are no longer subtle, but are warped, retarded, or exaggerated. We become emotionally aware of the conventional assumptions we project onto games and of our desire for these to be perfectly reflected back. Jason Rohrer champions the game, "Braid has the potential to change the way you think about reality. It will certainly change the way you think about video games." The first claim is made because of the way *Braid* portrays love, loss, even the technocultural pursuit of science. The way that *Braid* portrays these issues is how it delivers on the second claim: by playing with the "innocent act" of playing games. *Braid* dovetails the neurotic pursuit of science for science's sake (represented in the trope of an apocalyptic atomic bomb scene), with the narrative conceit of saving princesses to ultimately play for perfection, procedural mastery, and fuzzy cocoon of electronic closure. To overstate it: playing videogames, engineering bombs, seeking perfect relationships, all glorify a technologized view of the world toward a similar effect. To understate it: *Braid* toys with the dramas of love, loss, and the technocultural pursuit of science, by allowing them to corrupt established videogame conventions with their contradictions and idiosyncrasies.

## Russian Formalism

As Jesper Juul describes in *Half-Real*, the narrative structure of fiction in games provides a frame, an orienting force, of familiar tropes, themes, and patterns that players pick up on in order to play. Game narratives help players fill in the blanks of the rules and motivations to play. If you see a princess, you safely feel compelled to go save her and slay some creatures along the way. The narrative formal avant-garde reworks these narrative conventions to expose the contingent nature of videogames and open up the experience of gameplay beyond flow. I am using the term *narrative formalism* as a contemporary term to denote the practice and theory of a foundational school of literary criticism, Russian Formalism, progenitor of many Modern literary and aesthetic philosophies in the 20th century. Russian Formalists were the first avant-garde to formulate theories of medium-specificity in general and the autonomy of poetic language and literature in particular. I have already mentioned that Greenberg said painting should not be a “stooge of literature” so it could also operate outside critical or symbolic “readings,” so it could be experiential and phenomenological beyond semiological restrictions. What was omitted was the fact Greenberg began his career as a literary critic, and the fundamental tool of his Modernist philosophy, formalism, was actually taken from literary studies, primarily Russian Formalism.<sup>1</sup> Literary theory had given Greenberg the tools to defend painting from not only literary theory, but also semiotics (which he took to rhetorically militaristic ends, for example, when he barred even the “barest suggestion of a recognizable entity” in “Modernist Painting”).<sup>2</sup> This genealogy is doubly important, as it is the source from which defenders of videogames draw ammunition to attack “foreign” cultural traditions from “colonizing” the medium.

Victor Shklovsky, the most important Russian Formalist, published a landmark essay in 1917 entitled, "Art as Device." The essay is where the phrase "make the stone *stony*" originates. Each medium has specific qualities that can be uniquely exploited to pull our relationship with reality back into play. Russian Formalists are formal with *narratives*; the way Picasso and Braque were formal with *representational space* in their cubist work. Russian Formalists were inspired by the Russian Futurists, who, like their Italian counterparts, deconstructed language and reinvented it through grunts, whistles, clicks, and howls. From the epic novel to the syllable, narrative formalists seize upon language at every scale and angle, level of complexity, and temporal duration. For example, take the line from, *Susie Asado* (1912), a poem by Gertrude Stein: "Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea." Saying it we're struck by several things. First, we become sensually aware of the texture and materiality of these bits of language through alliteration, repetition, and rhyme. Second, we might imagine or recall sipping a cool taste over lips and tongues. These effects are complementary. As Stein leisurely works our embodied memory of taste-and-sound, we can fleetingly "taste" orality. We're aware of the nuances and rhythm of language, how it mingles with the contours of memory, sensuality, and speech. The stone has been made *stony*. Another technique Stein developed may be understood as cubist poetry. She tore up and reconstructed "word-heaps" of the world. Stein gazed at a still life of food, for example, waiting "until something that was not the name of that thing but was in a way that actual thing would come to be written."<sup>3</sup> An excerpt of the results: "Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam, coloured wine, calm seen, cold cream, best shake." As readers, our focus is fused with two inseparable things: Stein's associative processes, and whatever the food she was looking at her. Readers or listeners have to reverse engineer her associations and toy with the words and sensations of food in memory and imagination like a

puzzle...what *could* carpet steak mean? Tastes, textures, and morphemes, slip and pile on each other like moist slabs of meat-tongues.

Terry Eagleton explains that Russian Formalism pulls “us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more ‘perceptible’. By having to grapple with language in a more strenuous, self-conscious way than usual, the world which that language inhabits is vividly renewed.”<sup>4</sup> The key terms of this avant-garde are *defamiliarize* and *estrangle*. We look and interact in our everyday lives out of habits that seem to work. The problem is that they work too well, or at least, we imagine that they work too well. The more you believe that our social reality is constructed and held together by narratives (from the micronarrative to the metanarrative), the more the narrative formal avant-garde makes sense. Janet Murray has famously woven videogames, stories, and “the real world,” in her vision of the digital bard. Murray provides succinct summation: “A game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest.”<sup>5</sup> The narrative formal avant-garde doesn’t only *resemble* the world through games, but it also disturbs that resemblance so its nature stands out in an odd relief. The narrative formal avant-garde breaks habits of narration, thought, action, and association, to make the stone *stony*. Instead of just presenting a stone in a game, the stone is also cracked apart, rolled around, groped, and looked in every which way, so it the stone lives beyond its instrumentation of immediate, seamless control. Reactivating the stone’s presence, it seems less like the flat, deflated, and abstract symbol “stone” and more like a full-bodied *thing* that enigmatically exists beyond its own representation and our manipulation. Whatever a stone is to our senses before it is named and narrated into a vast web of situated meaning, is foregrounded and made welcome. The stone irrupts into a situated presence instead of hiding beneath its own symbolization as

commodity, tool, obstacle, annoyance, or decoration. The biggest irony is that all this occurs through mediation. The underlying desire is direct, unmediated contact with the world, but this can only happen by playing with the means of mediation itself. In a game, there is no “stone,” but a stone as it is simulated in the game; so what we are gaining is a supple awareness, and liquidation, of our practices of looking and playing. Narrative formalism disrupts our patterns of storytelling in order to un-narrate, un-write, and un-speak the world. To let it be and exist unmediated, in order so we may struggle to grow new appendages and budding, raw sensual bridges into it.

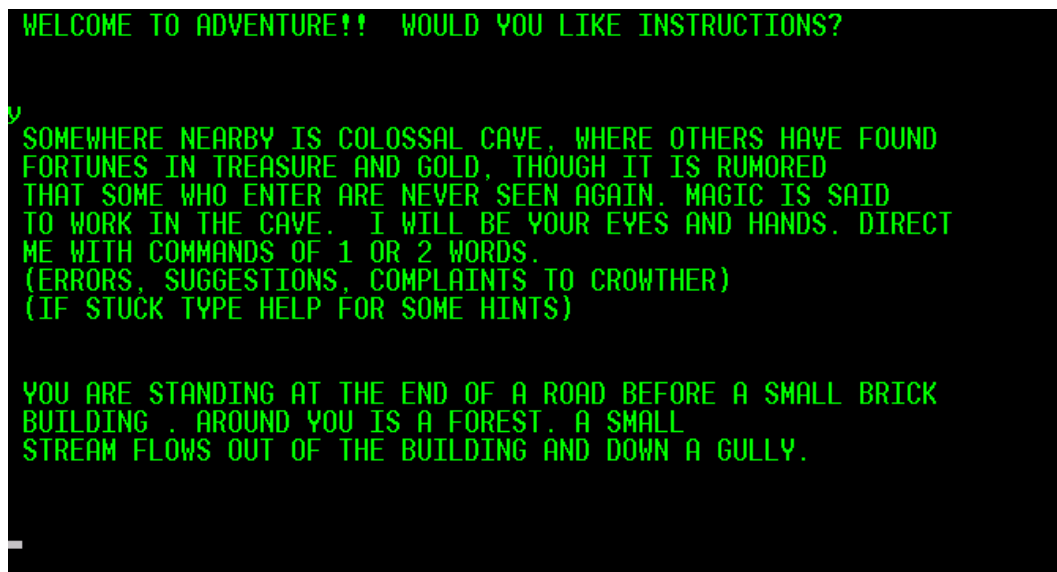
Originally, the domain of narrative formalism was literary and poetic rather than cinematic or ludic, so the literary will serve as the first main correlate to draw from. For Shklovsky, “the most typical novel in world literature” was *Tristram Shandy*, a novel where the narrator constantly interrupts himself and cannot find his point. The story eludes the comically loose and bumbling structure of its own narration. Because novels and poetry were the mediums of choice of Russian Formalists, shifts in narration, plot, syntax, intonation, rhythm, ellipses, morpheme-play, word-swapping, and so on, were the favored devices. They did not focus on the visual arts, and obviously predated digital mediums, like net art or videogames, by generations. It’s tricky to extrapolate their particular, practical theory about formal literature and poetry, and apply it to videogames, which are not usually primarily about reading, text, speech, but integrate visual, electronic, haptic, and reactive affordances into their narratives. What is most fascinating is how narratives in videogames are interwoven with and transformed by computation, ergodic interaction, as well as what how computers and videogames are narrated by popular culture. The best place to begin tracing how the avant-garde plays with narrative in



videogames is with the genre of game most ostensibly like literature, Interactive Fiction.

### **“take the stone”**

The original form of Interactive Fiction (IF) was the text adventure. Players typed in commands to control their avatar, talk with characters, move through environments, manipulate objects, and generally progress the narrative. It has since spawned many alternate sub-genres including mystery, religious, erotic, slice-of-life, and so on. As videogames graphically advanced, so did IF, from *King's Quest*, juxtaposing images and text; to the *Myst* series, which subsumed the story into graphical presentation and succulent, clickable images.



```
WELCOME TO ADVENTURE!!  WOULD YOU LIKE INSTRUCTIONS?

y
SOMEWHERE NEARBY IS COLOSSAL CAVE, WHERE OTHERS HAVE FOUND
FORTUNES IN TREASURE AND GOLD, THOUGH IT IS RUMORED
THAT SOME WHO ENTER ARE NEVER SEEN AGAIN. MAGIC IS SAID
TO WORK IN THE CAVE.  I WILL BE YOUR EYES AND HANDS. DIRECT
ME WITH COMMANDS OF 1 OR 2 WORDS.
(ERRORS, SUGGESTIONS, COMPLAINTS TO CROWTHER)
(IF STUCK TYPE HELP FOR SOME HINTS)

YOU ARE STANDING AT THE END OF A ROAD BEFORE A SMALL BRICK
BUILDING . AROUND YOU IS A FOREST. A SMALL
STREAM FLOWS OUT OF THE BUILDING AND DOWN A GULLY.
```

Figure 6-2 The start screen of the first text adventure, *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976).

The first adventure game was *Colossal Cave Adventure* Will Crowther programmed in 1976 and Don Woods expanded and debugged in 1977. It described the world through text. The player explored the world through typed input, such as

“go west” and acted within it via commands like “attack troll.” The game used a simple language parser that interpreted input text and output a result such as a change in the environment, the acquisition of treasure, or the death of the player. Since the player was actually authoring phrases of the text, she assumed in this sense co-authorial control. Nick Montfort, who wrote the first in-depth, published academic study of the genre, states, “Puzzles in a work of interactive fiction function to control the revelation of the narrative; they are part of an interactive process that generates narrative.”<sup>6</sup> Readers have always generated (and controlled to some degree) their own interpretations of the story, but the narrative (the structure by which the author reveals the story) was already established in the imprinted page. Reading IF requires that the player become co-author, configuring the underlying structure and narrative along with the computer and the original author.<sup>7</sup>

The input process is the strength and weakness of IF. On one hand, it affords a new kind of textual co-authorship, as stories are in part written as they are played out. On the other hand, it is difficult to ensure that the narrative structures into a coherent story. The practical constraint is the gap between a limited database of language parsable by the game, and the complexity and nuance of the language we use to narrate and navigate everyday life. The most frustrating experience in IF is having to type in the exact word or word combination, when the desired action should be obvious. The game states: “There is a rock on the ground.” To which the player types, “take the rock.” To which the game replies, “I don’t understand ‘rock’.” The player racks her brain, perchance realizing the programmer’s laziness, and types: “take the stone,” to which the game replies, “stone taken.” Ironically, the inability of the parser to process the assumptions of everyday language has the effect of defamiliarization, but defamiliarization of what? It makes the stone *stony*, or more accurately, the directive action of picking up the stone, through its machine

ignorance of “rock.” As we shall see with *Façade*, machine ignorance is a powerful affordance that artists invoke (intentionally and otherwise) to make incredibly rich and avant-garde narrative formal works, works far richer than stupid parser failure. When conventional input breaks down *artistically*, the player is reeling to reverse engineer their lost agency. Suddenly aware of the virtual prosthesis, because of its ill-fitting nature, the game assemblage of logical circuits, narrative structures, text blocks, and buttons protrude into the experience—the alien that you forgot was clinging to your face just started squirming around, and now you have too much information about its anatomy.

Just as the player may not speak the parser’s language, she can also run into difficulty interpreting the narrative well enough to infer what actions are needed to move the plot forward. At times, players of IF are not even trying to win any longer, but are trying to discover how to meaningfully die to end an awkward game. The text generated in IF is read or scanned. An input command is tested by the player. Which fails to do anything interesting in the system. Which leads to rereading and rescanning. Obsessively scouring for word clues and linguistic subtlety oscillates language between the luminously charged: every word vibrates and pullulates with possibility and power, to the dull and drained: every letter is a little glowing stab in the eye, and an affront to the actual plot of the story. When a player is stuck, the brute force method is to apply every allowable action to every named object in every virtual room, typing: “look under bed,” “look under painting,” until all combinations of nouns, verbs, and locales, are spent. The brute force method has even become a convention through which authors acknowledge misplaced effort: “You’ll kill yourself trying to lift the Altar of Stone!” As a way to regain the feeling of agency, as well as determine a structure of the narrative in terms of space, causality, logic, and so on, players create ancillary media, notes, word lists, and

diagrams to draw out the storyworld. Players who have trouble visualizing or keeping track of the spatial layout of the world may end up drawing crude maps, which they annotate and continually revise. Rather than detracting from the experience, most players consider these drawings to be an added level of participation in the storyworld. More than co-authors, they become meta-authors fleshing out the world in which the story takes place, recapitulating Tolkien, who developed Elvish and Dwarvish languages, and drew meticulous maps of Middle Earth to create a space in which an expansive storyworld may spread out, in which many individual adventures could both unfold independently and converge when necessary.

IF is an extraordinarily difficult genre to write, design, program, and play, which is why it is a genre of aficionados and academics. Estranging players is seldom the intent of IF authors, although IF is often experienced in a narrative formalist way, even by veteran players. The community is ambivalent about its status as an “accidental avant-garde,” wishing greater acceptance, but also wishing to push the boundaries of the medium, which make gameplay experimental, unfamiliar, and complicated. *Colossal Cave Adventure* was intended to flow smoothly, Crowther anticipating the game for “non-computer people.” Crowther explored caves as a hobby and desired to share the wonder and thrill he felt caving as a way to reconnect with his children. Crowther wanted the game to be “a re-creation in fantasy of my caving, and also...a game for the kids.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than to defamiliarize the experience of building an adventure, he wanted the game to be a transparent experience in which the player is immersed inside a storyworld. The player was not to be entangled in the computational jungle of narrative, wrestling half inside, half outside the story, as occurs with narrative formal works. Playing out along this trajectory, IF was actually a popular videogame genre in the 1980s and early 1990s,

dozens of the hit games produced by Infocom, most notably the *Zork* series. Early adopters of personal computers were excited to navigate the frontier of computation, and willing to learn these textual videogame forms. As graphics for PCs improved titles like the explorer-puzzle, *Myst* series appeared to juice the new affordance, enjoying meteoric popular success. The *Monkey Island* series by LucasArts, launched in 1990, used many narrative formal elements, such as swashbuckling accomplished through verbal insults. The genre's popularity evaporated when action-oriented games like *Doom* and *Tomb Raider* accelerated the speed of input, and leveraged greater rendering power through the newly available abundance of processing cycles per second.

Critics of the game industry, such as Chris Crawford and Raph Koster, blame the mass shift toward twitch-action and graphics (which was away from the reflective, more language-based interaction of earlier games) for a stagnancy that the videogame medium currently and chronically suffers. The commercial marginality of IF means that the pressure to regulate it arises from within its own community. Ostensibly similar to Koster's "Declaration of Player's Rights," Graham Nelson wrote, "A Bill of Player's Rights," which focuses on delivering flow to players rather than the legal protections that Koster advocates. At the expense of experimentation, Nelson advocates for games in which the player "need not do unlikely things," need not "type exactly the right verb," are not "given too many red herrings," but are "able to understand a problem once it is solved."<sup>9</sup> The average level of estrangement in IF is supposedly killing the medium. If Nelson's manifesto were accepted by artists, IF would have a greater chance of winning back attention of mainstream players. However, because of a now-entrenched outsider status, the IF community ignores Nelson's proviso. It rewards divergence and experimentation in its niche genre. The result is that narrative formal avant-garde works actually dominate the IF

genre. The genre is still so experimental, every work seems to open up and wrinkle its mediation and narration of reality. A similar trend occurs with augmented reality (AR) games. Most AR games done in the lab are avant-garde, accidentally, of course. This is because AR game conventions are, for the most part, not yet rock solid and flow-inducing. To play is to slip and grapple with the augmented mediation of play, on top of whatever the game experience is supposed to be.

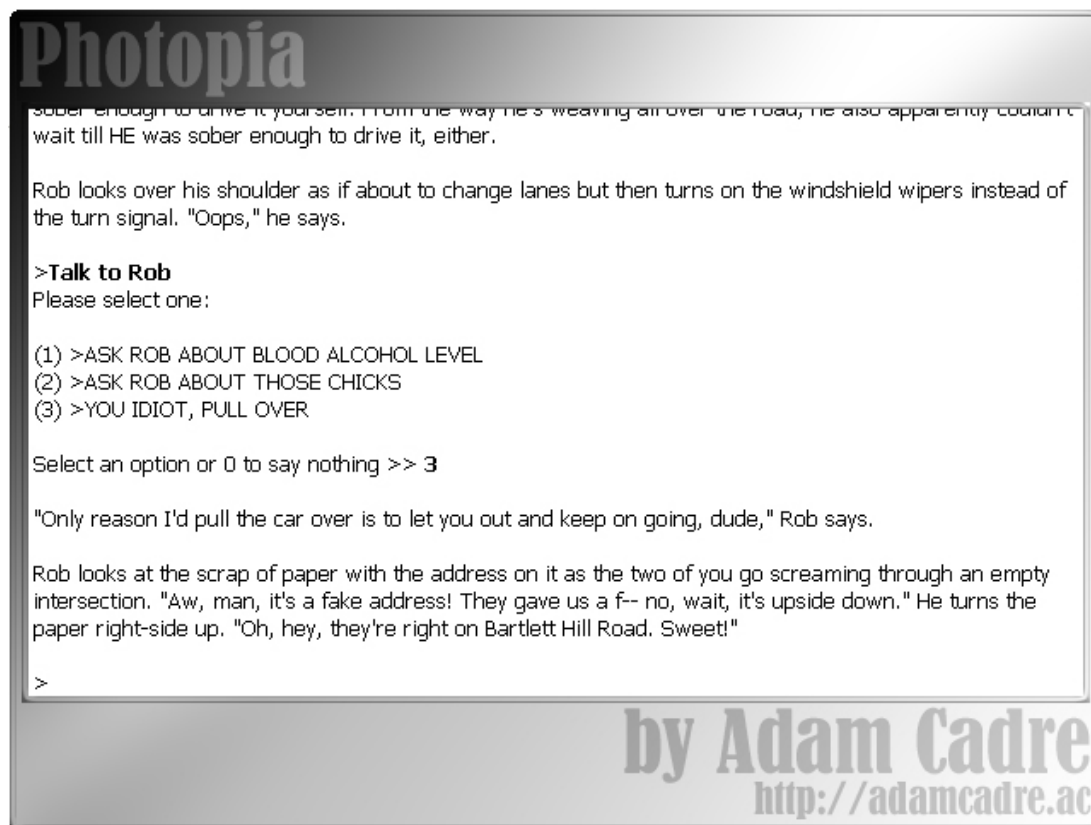


Figure 6-3 The player of *Photopia* unexpectedly jumps into different character roles.

Purposely avant-garde works embrace the strategies of formalism, and not merely by serendipitously foregrounding a parser's inadequacy within a textual interface. Adam Cadre's *Photopia* (1998) is a text-based piece that intentionally violates Nelson's Bill of Player's Rights for IF. The story of *Photopia* is plotted in a way that does not make immediate sense. It does not follow a predictable sequence

of cause and effect, action and reaction. The game begins where the story ultimately ends. The player is a hung-over passenger in a speeding car packed with college students that crashes into another car. Near the end of the game the player may figure out that the accident killed a thirteen-year-old girl named Alley, whose character is the central axis around which the plot turns. The player experiences the world through a flurry of perspectives, playing every character except the protagonist, Alley, a young babysitter. Although she is never directly playable, Alley remains the touchstone around which our movements and world roams, rises, and falls. We act through her father, her murderers, even her dreams. Through non-sequitur scenes, and mystifying shifts in perspective, the game jumps forward and backwards in time, and back and forth between different kinds of characters and agencies. Moreover, *Photopia* is in fact two worlds woven together, Alley's fantasy, and her reality. The game is a montage of disjointed locations: a speeding car, the side of a baby's crib, the surface of Mars, and so on. In the scenes that take place in a child's reality, the text is displayed in white, but each subsequent scene adopts its own color, red for Mars, or blue for the sea. The life and death of Alley is the axis around which the bizarre structure works, but this structure, in turn, exaggerates and distorts its own topic, serially rendering it haunting, humorous, sad, and alien.

Montfort has observed that *Photopia* has no all-encompassing, frame-world or base of operations. There is no equivalent to an establishing shot, or an expository setup, which would ground the player. In the middle of a scene, for example, the narrator suddenly addresses the player, "Hey, kiddo, do not fall asleep on me yet." At first, this remark seems as if it might belong to Alley's father, but near the end of the game it becomes apparent that this is Alley's own voice telling a bedtime story to a girl she is babysitting. Mirroring the confusion of the player, and to further compound the narrative situation, Alley does not realize that the story she has been

telling was presented to her when she was an infant. The final game scene describes baby Alley cooing at a computer monitor that her father installed above her crib, and flashing onscreen is that same space travel scene Alley just described. One reviewer reveals the mania of control over orientation that we often bring to games, "Perhaps you even think the author is making fun of you....I did. But when you get used to it, you'll love it and quitting will be out of the question."<sup>10</sup> By piquing and playing with our desire for closure and control, we can appreciate the undulations of desire itself. The fractured presentation of Alley's story calls forth various kinds of empathy, coming from different perspectives and personas, but it leaves them all hanging together loosely, which could be called "electronic fracture" or fraying rather than Murray's, "electronic closure." The player pieces the elements together and by doing so becomes emotionally implicated in her own fiddling with the connections. Rather than just being moved, as in a non-formalist works, players find themselves reflecting and unraveling on how or why they might be moved.



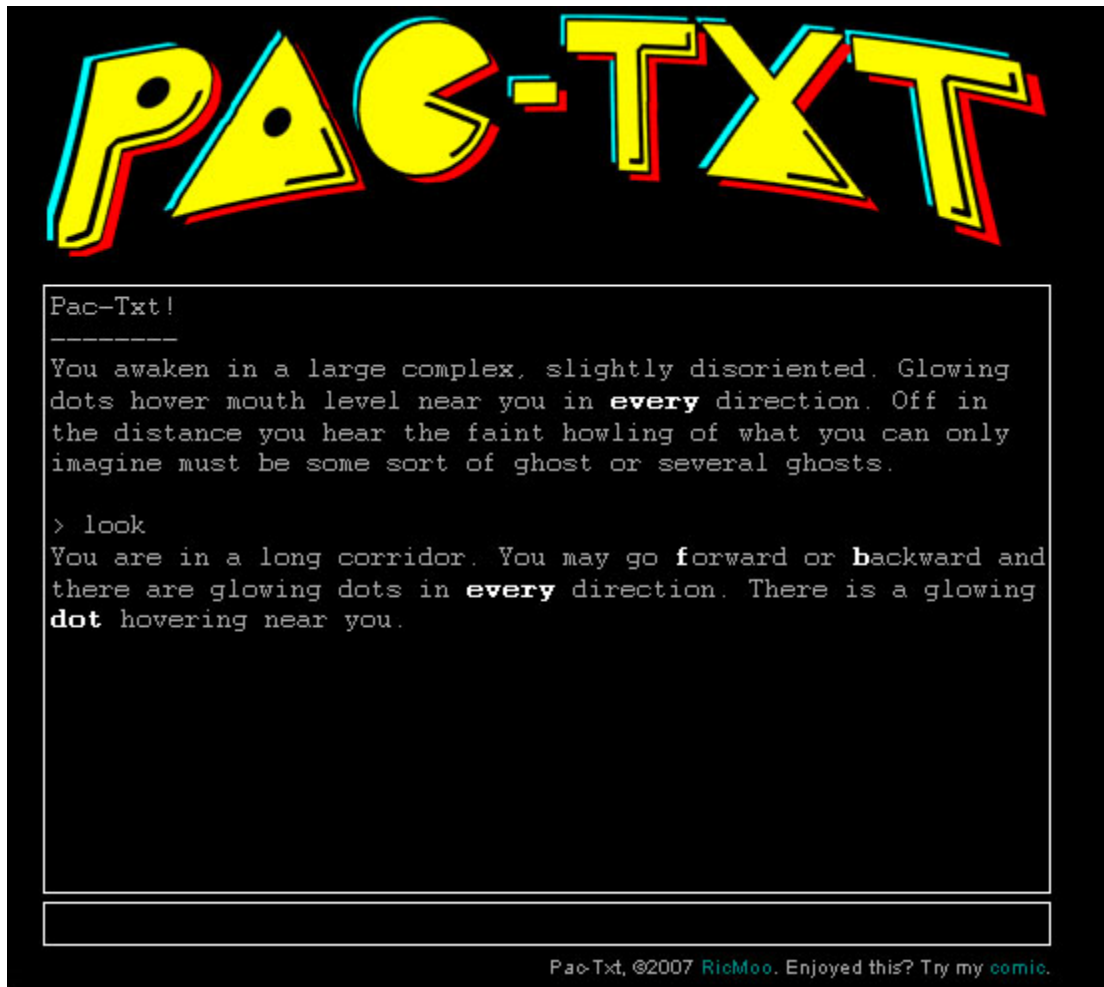


Figure 6-4 *Pac-Txt* turns the classic *Pac-Man* game into a neurotic text adventure.

A videogame at the other end of the dramatic spectrum is an absurd little work by Richard Moore's entitled, *Pac-Txt* (2007). It is an IF transliteration of the original classic *Pac-Man* into a text adventure. A similar work by Moore is *Paper Pong*, a wry choose-your-own-adventure book that transliterates the classic *Pong* game.<sup>11</sup> *Pac-Txt* opens: "You awaken in a large complex, slightly disoriented. Glowing dots hover mouth level near you in **every** direction. Off in the distance you hear the faint howling of what you can only imagine must be some sort of ghost or several ghosts."<sup>12</sup> It is the reverse of *Photopia*, in a way. *Photopia*'s input was rather mundane and easy, fulfilling objectives was a fairly clear endeavor, but the

storyworld in *Photopia* was itself shuffling, and our perspective, psychotically detached, divided, and roaming. In contrast, *Pac-Txt*'s storyworld is familiar, even nostalgic, but the input to move is rendered circuitously repetitive and neurotic. To operate the old arcade game, players seamlessly wobbled the joystick in cardinal directions to send Pac-Man chomping down the corridor. To manipulate him in *Pac-Txt*, the player must type "f" to move forward, but only by one dot, then type "e" to eat it. The player laboriously signals gameplay in a stilted staccato. The act of typing-to-move tries to smooth itself out, however, to become naturalized into an unconscious twitch pattern. Action accelerates into an: e-f-e-f-e-f-e-f-e-f, rhythm, but then the prompter flashes, "Smack! You walked into a wall." From there, the player must rotate right: "r," or left: "l," and then continue on e-f-e-f-e-f-e-f-ing.

Trying to visualize the maze seems impossible in *Pac-Txt*, leaving you feeling lost, blind, in constant danger—as if you were trapped in a dark dungeon. Sight becomes tactile. You only "see" ghosts after they attack: "You have been **attacked** by a cyan ghost! You pass out and awake minutes later back where you began." According to comments, players love tormenting themselves, "I'm not sure what's more soul-crushing—that someone took the effort to write a web-based *Pac-Man* text adventure in the style of *Zork* or that I just spent fifteen minutes ensuring that it adhered to the maze layout perfectly."<sup>13</sup> The mildly sadistic type-to-move mechanic injects an uncanny novelty into an old, familiar storyworld. We don't have a choice but to reexamine our memories askew. The sound of typing evokes the "waka waka waka waka waka" animation of the original. It sure *sounds* lively, but players are flying blind, only able to know and to react to what's happening via a slow and sticky filter of button keys and character-by-character text. Our attuned visual apparatus is deprived of its evolutionary vitality and talent of twitch-quick reactions and path planning. By blocking sight and chopping up once-smooth controls, this

tactile, aural, non-optical game, gives as sensual slack and opportunity for visual memories of the original game to flash up, ruffling our minds. By forcing players into a textually mechanistic relationship, *Pac-Txt* affords reaching through the artifice and getting a new handle on the moment-to-moment loop of control that we long for, and perhaps (if we are old enough) charmingly pulled us into the electronic heart of an arcade machine years ago in the original *Pac-Man*.

### **Ironic Realism**

Most narrative formal videogames breach the text and keyboard barrier to bring more affordances of the medium to bear on the experience, namely, its graphic and reactive characteristics. Russian Formalism pushed the materiality of literature and speech in every way it thought possible. By exploring and exaggerating more of the medium's form, this avant-garde can broaden the range of its estranging effects.

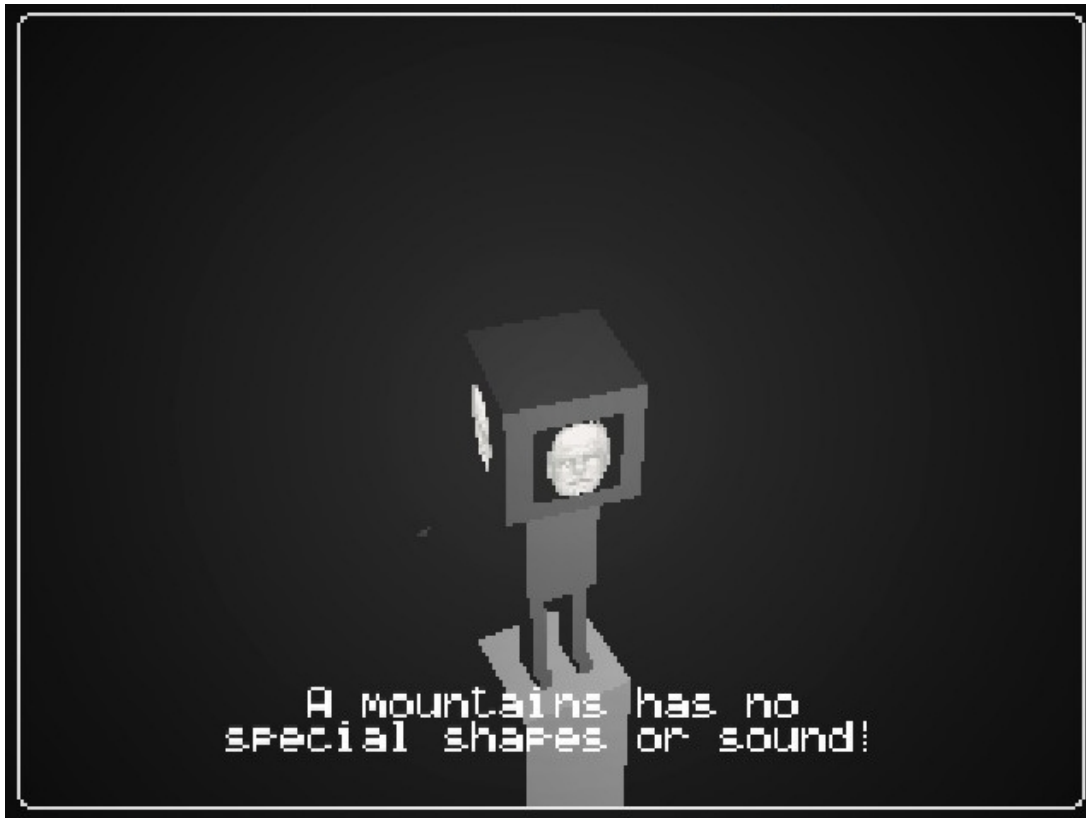
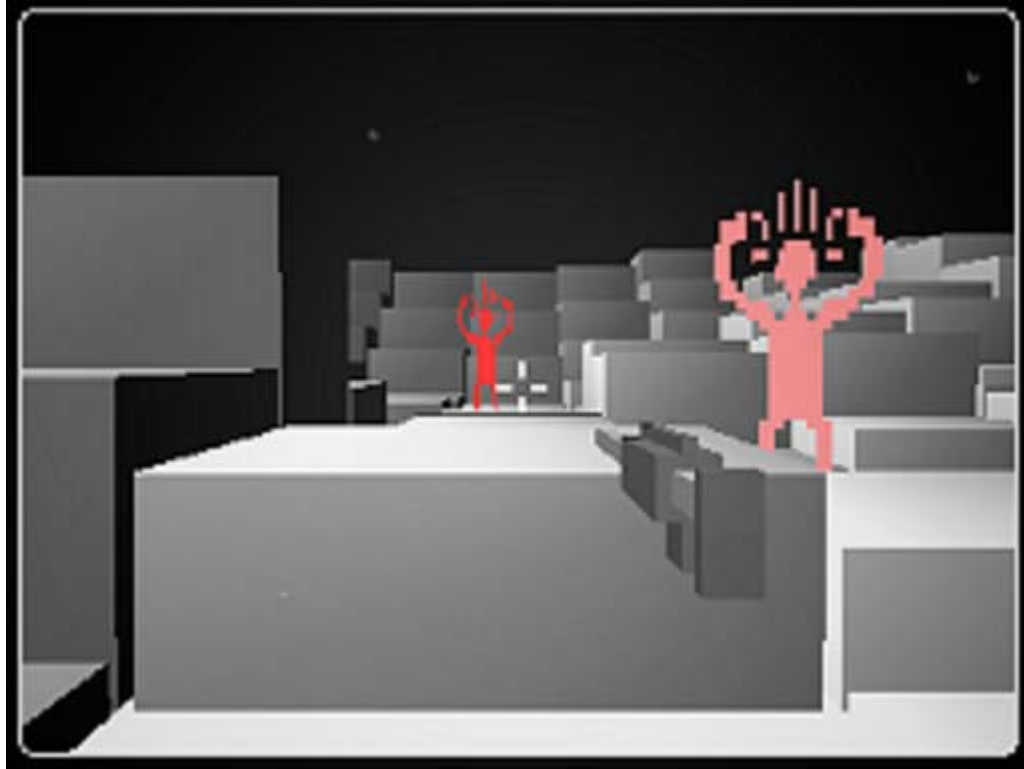


Figure 6-5 The president in *Mondo Agency* soliloquizes into his private void; the meaning of his words surf in and out of a conceptual boundary that makes sense.

*Mondo Agency* (2007) by Cactus is a mashup of genres: the 3D FPS, the action platformer, and puzzle game. Set in a dystopian, film noir future, it's visually filtered through film-grain. The player is recruited as AGENT-65386 to save the robot president, but is given no hint at how to do this. Is the president psychotic or the world? In style and story, *Mondo Agency* evokes the mesmerizing film, *La Jetée*, about a prisoner recruited by a future government as time-traveling detective assassin. The cutscenes between levels depict the president, floating alone on a pedestal in pitch-black space. He speaks what sounds to be a language (synthesized English?) played backwards. It's purposely translated as "Engrish" subtitles (e.g. when Anime is subtitled by a non-native English speaker). This is orientating in terms of evoking a feel of the world, yet logically confusing. Via these monologues

the president poses rambling, elliptical philosophical questions that he sometimes answers himself.



The red “natives” of *Mondo Agency* threaten the president’s safety as well as his psychological stability; anathema on several levels to the president and the player.

The chief enemies in *Mondo Agency* are the “natives,” who are modeled as flashing red, 2D sprites. Sliding around 3D space, they gesticulate with hands raised above heads in a mock, mute kind of mania. Feet curl upwards, snapping up and down, in what appears to be some sort of abbreviated walk cycle animation. Unnerving. When shot, they shatter in a blocky shimmer accented with a crystalline sound. The ethereally digital natives befuddle and plague the president as much as the player. The lone president ponders into the inky void:

I don't know what a natives is..  
Is a natives worth many money?  
I can see a natives but where is it really?  
And by what is it made of?  
If I build a machine will the native destroy it?  
We built a world and a natives will destroy it!

Although the audio of the president is played backwards, exasperation comes across the last line as it is spoken. Ontological questions on the nature of the world and its objects are constantly posed, and the answers shift around like the “native” sprites. Confusion is virtualized in the spatial puzzle portions of the game. In one area you are in a *Q\*Bert*-like valley, or large blocky ditch surrounded by block “mountains.” Walk anywhere and your private little valley goes with you. Mountains shrink underfoot as you approach. Mountains rise back as you pass over. At any moment, flat natives, floating in 3D space, converge on the valley. Impervious to the mountains, they float through the tumultuous blocks unmolested, leaving you paranoically spinning to catch slivers of them, impishly firing at the walls of your subjective valley. *Mondo Agency* can be more horrifying than AAA horror games, or, perhaps just as horrifying, but in a different kind of way. AAA titles, with high graphic content, dynamically generated sound design (timing music crescendos with vital moments in the action), professional voice acting, and so on, pour on the references. Sensuality and causality are flooded in with the same reinforced message. The *Resident Evil* franchise meticulously depicts danger in high fidelity, communicating in crystal clarity exactly why, how, and by what you are about to die. *Silent Hill* or other “fog horror” games use limited sight and attenuated pacing of the flow to resurrect paranoia, but these games don't use all of the affordances of the medium to call those feelings forth as strongly as possible. Causality and the

logic of space itself remain safe and secure, even in the foggiest games of the fog horror genre. In *Mondo Agency*, however, the player isn't really just trying to survive, but she is trying to gain grips on the enigmatic situation itself. She is playing for little scraps of coherency floating in a desolate, inhuman gamespace that is eerily folding in on itself logically, spatially, and aurally.



Figure 6-6 David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), saturated with male anxieties, affords a kind of anti-catharsis for the viewer: rather than dramatic closure, the cinematic world opens a void where the stability of meaning itself, is threatened.

One of Cactus's major influences is filmmaker David Lynch and his signature style of epistemological horror. We can understand the force in Cactus's work if we examine Lynch's strategy a bit. In a Lynch film, the audience is given the occasional solid mooring. For example, in the middle of *Mulholland Drive* (2001), an oddly timed but incredibly sung ballad by a tragic heroine provides a sensual respite. A drizzle of honey into the ear hole, and the pleasure spills over, beyond the immediate moment, leaving a sticky sweet residue on other parts of the stark, disjointed narrative. In Lynch's work, conventional narrative structures are displaced, but critically, they only shift out of phase *partially* rather than wholly.

Characters in *Lost Highway* switch actors mid-film, but continue on the plot trajectories already established. Charles Kaufmann further developed this technique in his film *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), in which the moving performance of Phillip Seymour Hoffman serves to anchor the epistemologically spiraling, increasingly “meta” narrative.

Unworking postmodern irony, and cutting through common parody, Lynch combines normative cinematic conventions with “non-representational,” abstract cinema of the radical formal avant-garde. In *The cinema of David Lynch: American dreams, nightmare visions*, Sheen and Davison explain, “Lynch meshes the avant-garde and classical modes in disorienting ways that move beyond the orthodox postmodern logic of irony and parody [...] Lynch lurches violently between avant-garde set pieces and its sources in the conventional Hollywood and television genres of teen romance, soap opera, science-fiction and family tragedy.”<sup>14</sup> From normalcy to parody and beyond, Lynch’s work, such as *Twin Peaks*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive* capture a kind of “ironic realism” where the force of the work is opening the audience’s tension between heartfelt emotions, cultural memories of classical Hollywood, and postmodern detachment. None of these sources dominate, leaving the viewer in a state of contradiction tinged with epistemological crisis: I *sense* what’s going on, but I can’t explain it!

The lynchpin of Cactus’s work is his realization that by keeping one game convention solidly intact, as Lynch does so well, other conventions surrounding it can be blown around like tethered kites—tweaked beyond recognition around the centering convention. Cactus explains, “The great thing about making shoot ‘em ups is that it is such a basic concept that it lets you play with pretty much every aspect of game making.”<sup>15</sup> Like a Lynch film, *Mondo Agency* works well because it serially



deploys enough hooks to keep the player halfway in the game, but only halfway, letting the other half suffer itself trying to get back together with the rest of the mind, into the familiar flow, just always out of reach. A great tease. The player *almost* understands the goings on, but is never quite sure, and that gap feels real yet ironic, detached yet personal, conventional yet alien. Neither negation nor convention, it deftly slices another road through mediation.

### Experience rather than Meaning

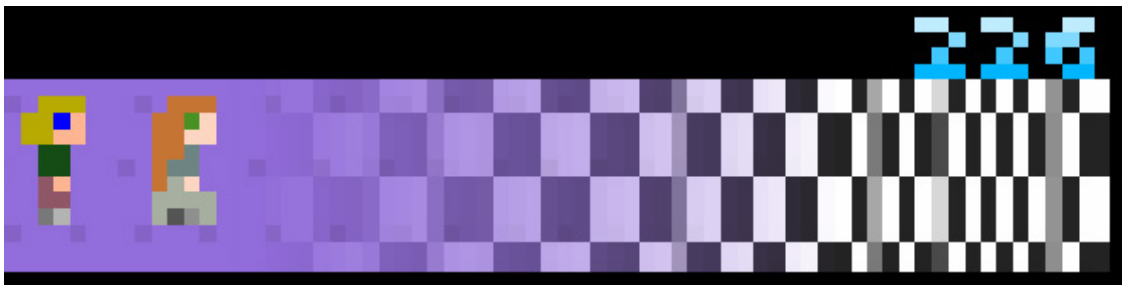


Figure 6-7 The player can walk any path in *Passage*, but she'll always die in five minutes.

*Passage* (2007), a game by Jason Rohrer, doesn't use estranging techniques to evoke horror, but uses them to defamiliarize a presentation of mortality. A game without any text to read or goals to solve, the player of *Passage* simply walks for five minutes (always five minutes, no more and no less) and promptly dies. You begin on the left side of a thin horizontal world as a pixelated blond, blue-eyed man, presenting Rohrer himself. The background midi music is reminiscent of an old-school adventure game, complementing the aliased, low-resolution graphics. Wherever you walk, the avatar remains center left on the screen and the world scrolls by behind it. The world, the future, is laid out before you to the right. A few pixels of a woman glimmers into being, becoming clearer if you approach. Touch her and a heart blooms. She'll never leave your side. Now attached to you, some

paths will be impassable, certain treasures unreachable. Remain a bachelor and reach more treasure, but get fewer points for exploring alone. In the course of minutes, your character is balding and your lover's long hair, graying. You notice you're not on the left-hand side of the screen anymore, but the middle. Although you can no longer see far ahead, you now may more of where you have been behind you. Life is slipping by. Soon, you're impotently hunched over, and your wife's hair white. As the right side of the screen touches her, she turns into a tombstone. You're free to walk around, but grief cripples you and death arrives. Left with a final score, Rohrer says, "Your score looks pretty meaningless hovering there above your little tombstone."<sup>16</sup> Rohrer states, "*Passage* is meant to be a memento mori game" (Latin for "remember you will die"). Historically in art, a memento mori was an image, often a skull, placed in a picture as a reminder of the frail delimitations of a mortal life. To speak of a memento mori videogame is to place videogames in this European tradition.

*Passage's* tactic of defamiliarization is subtle, but it must be subtle to set up the situation in a particular way. *Passage* places your life in the game as subservient to your death. Mortality is locked in at five minutes, framing everything that occurs up to that point less significant than that predetermined finality. You live to die. In popular games, it is the reverse: you die to live. You die, only to reappear, to die again. Death is but a speed bump. Death is subsumed by a consuming, all-powerful electronic life-force in the replayable simulation. In *Passage*, however, you live to die. Instead of centering the usual hubris, vitality, and capricious play, now centered is modesty, frailty, and mute reflection. Other games have taken this further, where once the game is over it erases itself from the computer's hard drive, or makes it impossible to replay.

The variable experience of *Passage's* gameplay is more important than correctly "reading" one stable meaning in it, or deriving an intended expression from it. It is difficult not to reduce games like *Passage* as an exercise in rhetoric, as a riddle to solve, as an argument for, or against, something. Of course, we *could* extrapolate some sort of argument if we like: Life is valuable because it is limited, and videogames do not usually evoke permanent death (implying that they could and perhaps should), but this misses the actual thrust of the work. One detractor of *Passage* claims it is "an exercise in laying bare the simplest semiotic structures of the journey through life. As a result, it can never tell us anything we don't already know."<sup>17</sup> It may indeed "lay bare a simple semiotic structure," but to play it is not about determining "its message" or have it "tell us anything we don't already know." It is about reactively *presenting* us something through its narrative structure. Whatever *meaning* we project onto the structure is secondary to our enacted movement through it. It's about facilitating an *experience* through the contours of a situation facilitated by the "bare semiotic structure" of the game.

To illustrate, I refer to a historical narrative formal work of a very different type, but one that has been subjected to a similar kind of criticism: of facile, semiotic simplicity. Jack Kerouac's rambling, autobiographical book, *On the Road*, recounts his experience hitchhiking and driving across America in the 1950s. It is the iconic novel of the beat generation, but also a prime example of narrative formalism delivering a rich experience through a "simple semiotic structure." It was a thirst for life that drove Neal Cassady and Kerouac into a stream of experiences stringing banal misadventures, little ironic tragedies, senseless pain, formation, and dissolution of friendships, and many mildly humorous mishaps. In short, its plot drew from whatever happened to happen during those three gallivanting years on the road. The narrative structure was the exigencies of life itself, without much

meaning or plan. Just because there was no grandly plotted adventure, does not evacuate the work of energy, or void the experiences that occurred while living that life or occur while reading the novel. The original manuscript of *On the Road* was a 120 foot paper scroll onto which Kerouac typed out (in three Benzedrine-addled weeks at his mother's house) the entire novel single-spaced, without margins or paragraph breaks. The scroll format was divided into pages and paragraphs for the book, published in 1957, but the stream-of-consciousness prose style, mimicking the flow of events themselves, survived the reformatting. The literary style foregrounds the form of the work and the words on the page, but it also reflects and amplifies Kerouac's experience of the world in that duration, distorted yet discernable, ever-tumbling over the page.

### **The Dramatic Uncanny Valley**

In the works examined so far in this chapter: *Braid*, *Photopia*, *Pac-Txt*, *Mondo Agency*, and *Passage*, story was amplified and echoed through the narrative structure, and vice versa. In each example, the artist left her capable prints all over the work, even across, especially across, its nauseating epistemological voids, its mundane deaths, and its logical paradoxes. This is not the only way narrative formal work can be made. Artistic accidents can also rend experience into the luminously uncanny. Rough decouplings between narrative and story can pry open gaps in which players slide around. In this case, not only are the players set adrift like Jack Kerouac, but also apparently so are the artists. They are unable to craft according to their own implied visions. Nothing is more immediately tragic than experiencing the vicarious failure of an artist. The bigger the gap between her heartfelt aspirations and the actual work of her toil, the better the tragedy. Familiar genres, conventions, and tropes, are not only at odds with each other, but are at odds the artist's own

hands. Through material rebellion the artist secures a haunting presence through the residual, unplaced energy of her camp effort. Exemplary of this “approach,” if it can be called that, is *Façade*, a riveting narrative formal work, perhaps the greatest formal game yet made, in its eloquent resistance to its creators’ command.



Figure 6-8 *Façade* characters perform in a dramatic uncanny valley via their overwrought, yet under-motivated banter, rendering the underlying technology, as well as the herculean effort of the artists, Mateas and Stern, strangely palpable and present.

*Façade* (2005) is an interactive drama by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern. Launch it, and it’s apparent that the trope of the puzzle (which is common to interactive fiction) runs in conflict with the apparent goal of *Façade*. The “dramatic properties” to be realized in *Façade* were “intensification and unity of action” predicated upon a “willing suspension of disbelief.”<sup>18</sup> Mateas offers a description of

the intended experience from his PhD dissertation, "*Façade* is a domestic drama in which you, the player, using your own name and gender, play the character of a longtime friend of Grace and Trip, an attractive and materially successful couple in their early thirties. Tonight is a bit of a reunion; you all first met in college, but haven't seen each other for a couple of years. Shortly after arriving at Grace and Trip's apartment, the evening turns ugly as you become entangled in the high conflict dissolution of Grace and Trip's marriage. Their marriage has been sour for years; deep differences, buried frustrations and unspoken infidelities have killed their love for each other. No one is safe as the accusations fly, sides are taken and irreversible decisions are forced to be made."<sup>19</sup>

The player types, walks around, and clicks on items to interact with the couple and the environment. The text parser's natural language processing allows the player, in theory, to type whatever she wishes. The player doesn't need to adjust her vocabulary to some predetermined list of verbs, which most IF requires. If the parser does not understand it "fails well," trying to hide its confusion by having Grace or Trip change the subject or offer a glib comment. Although the player inputs by typing, the couple communicates to each other and back to the player in prerecorded audio clips. The game is loaded with a large database of voice-acted dialogue, which gives the drama manager some range and nuance to draw from. Topics of conversation go from the sexual innuendo to modern art, the ugliness of divorce, and a litany of insecurities of which Trip and Grace mutually peck. For example, if the player chooses to antagonize the couple, Grace may exclaim, "What? Oh, all right. Yes. Just admit it, Trip, admit it, we have a shitty marriage! We've never been really happy, from day one! Never, goddammit!" Through reconciliatory and empathetic responses, the couple draws closer together. But be too empathetic, and the player risks making somebody jealous, and get kicked out of the apartment.

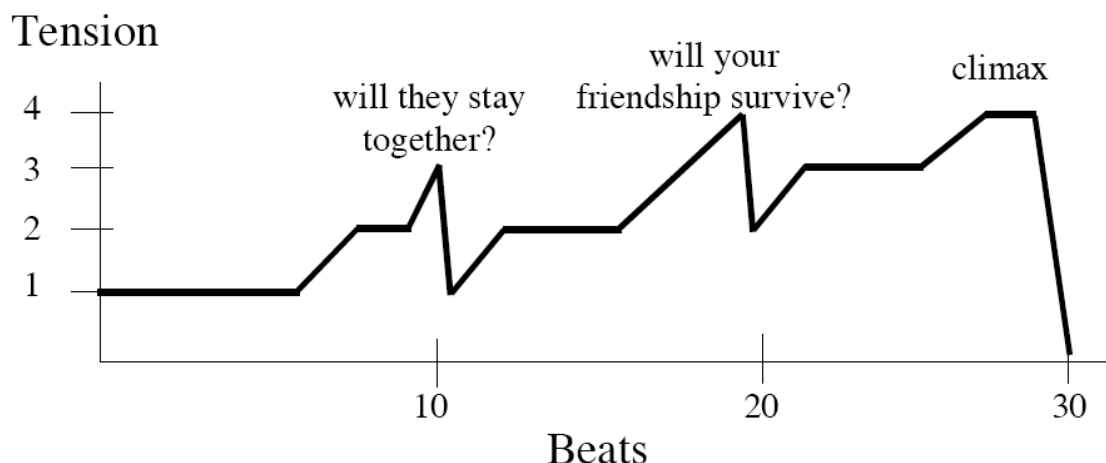


Figure 6-9 A figure from Mateas's dissertation diagrams how *Façade* was intended to deliver the same Aristotelian story structure of rising action, climax, and dénouement that provides the emotional logic of mainstream film and television.

An AI “drama manager” orchestrates the “dramatic beats,” the smallest unit of story change, in order best flesh out an overarching plot. The artists studied the work of Robert McKee, professor at the University of Southern California and author of the “screenwriter’s bible,” which is widely known in the entertainment industry. The artists studied the bible, adapting the formulas that McKee has popularized among practicing screenwriters. Stern and Mateas see themselves as extending the narrative regime of Hollywood and TV to interactive drama and videogames: “We envisioned something where you could come home from work and play it from beginning to end, just like you come home from work and watch a half-hour television show.” Grace and Trip’s emotional states, motivations, attitude toward the player, are continually reshaped to ratchet up or diffuse the dramatic tension according to the ideally determined plotline. The procedurally generated plot tries to adhere to the narrative style we’ve come to expect from film and television drama. Mateas outlines a key challenge *Façade* tries to answer, “interactive drama foregrounds the tension between interaction and story: how can an

interactive experience have the experiential properties of classical, Aristotelian drama (identification, economy, catharsis, closure) while giving the player the interactive freedom to have a real effect on the story?"<sup>20</sup>

Of course, none of this works as planned. Mateas and Stern have remarked they only succeeded about thirty percent of the way.<sup>21</sup> The player is not supposed to be aware of the material presence of the technology or the conventions at work, or the years of grinding labor by techie academics, but she is aware of all of these. Mateas wishes to afford the player "strong agency," for example, "How the façade of their marriage cracks, what is revealed, and the final disposition of Grace and Trip's marriage and their friendship with you depends on your actions." However, the player's catharsis-desiring focus on the "marriage" soon frays toward simply trying to manage and orient the experience itself. The agency of the player may be strong, but she is doubly occupied by struggling to maintain coherency, and on top of that, be therapist to some annoying, mutually abusive friends. The façade that slips and cracks is the conceit of dramatic closure, of a stable virtual world that makes some sort of sense. In contrast, stands *Eliza* (1964-1966) by Joseph Weizenbaum. *Eliza* is a chatterbot simulation of a Rogerian therapist that interpellates the player as the patient who Eliza, the "doctor," is helping. *Façade* reverses that role. You are a friend interpellated as untrained marriage counselor. But slowly revealed to you is the fact that your clients are also apparently psychotic, and that you are really half marriage counselor, and half marriage counselor way out of your league.

Grace and Trip are creepy. While the drama manager is calculating what to do next, the couple blankly breathes and stares at the player like automatons, lobotomized, awaiting orders from an unseen mind controller. Accidentally



Lovecraftian, the characters become drably illuminated, human-*seeming* puppets. Their marriage is not the façade, but they are, husks of an alterior, alien presence. Some *thing* is making them vacillate between bickering academics, dumb catatonics, to dissociative, yet highly reactive, schizophrenics, to adolescent pricks—all in a matter of seconds. Grace and Trip are both equally erratic, so it isn't a coincidence, nor is it a fault in their character. An electric presence, ostensibly unfamiliar with how humans should act, is suddenly “down there” crunching its circuitous heart out to suck you into its failing drama. In short, Grace and Trip are suspended in a dramatic uncanny valley. The *uncanny valley* is a term introduced in the 1970s by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori to describe a state of representational uncertainty. 3D human characters or humanoid robots become repellant to people when they look and move—almost but not quite—like actual humans. The animated 3D characters in the film, *Polar Express* (2004), have become a favored example. The more realistic a human looks, the less forgiving we are when it moves unnaturally. It doesn't look self-motivated but mysteriously puppeted. The contradiction between living movement and dead matter evokes (perhaps only unconsciously) zombies and undead corpses, haunted and tortured. The effect is viscerally disturbing, evoking a sense of the abject, of a subtle, suspicious threat to our own bodies. *Façade's* characters don't so much *move* in the uncanny valley, but *live, think, and speak* in it. They are mired in the valley due to a discrepancy between realistic human appearance and unrealistic human movement. They are swamping around to a discrepancy between conventional mediation of dramatic of human characters (established in Hollywood film, TV, and increasingly in games) and the unrealistic, or alien, behavior of Grace and Trip. The player senses what they are *trying* to imitate: a married TV couple on the brink of divorce. *Façade*, to the degree it fails in this goal, reveals its manipulative, mechanical nature. Consuming media, we wish to be manipulated, but at the same time be ignorant of our coercion. Playing *Façade*, the

usual dramatic conventions, the usual mechanics of emotional manipulation and logical orchestration, split across gaps that are dramatic, logical, and technical. It is a fabulously campy, academic and bold, attempt at proceduralizing the conventions of dramatic narrative. But through its “failure” of foregrounded frailty and artificiality, it is spectacularly rewarding and “successful” as an avant-garde work. It reveals worlds about the nature of videogames, and the dramatic conventions that we have naturalized and desire.

Like the psychological state of flow, whether a videogame functions in a narrative formal way for a player, depends on her disposition, expectations, and skill. Chris Crawford provides a colorful example. He’s unnerved playing *The Sims* for its “distracting realism” such as the “obvious mistake” in the inclusion of urination and defecation, which he sees “rather like Leonardo da Vinci carefully painting the fly crawling across the Mona Lisa’s face.”<sup>22</sup> While minutia is grossly magnified, important details, even traumatic events, are ignored in the game. Crawford offers an anecdote from one of his few play sessions of *The Sims*. A young girl is terrorized all night by a ghost. She scrambles around the house unable to hide from it. Eventually, she collapses unconscious in front of her mother’s bed. The next morning, mom steps over the prostrate daughter to go to the bathroom and leave for work. The disjunction disturbs Crawford, yet, for most players, it’s not strange or significant, but easily glossed over or seamlessly rationalized. It’s tempting to be envious of Crawford’s disposition, as many other games are probably just as strange to him. Surreal flies must be crawling all over gamespace in his eyes, if only he were interested in experiencing them in an avant-garde way.

## Scatological Cleansings

*Façade* is a notable work due to the diligent amount of energy, theory, and craft, which it received from Mateas and Stern. It is a notable *avant-garde* work, however, in the way it splinters apart under that pressure, and makes that contingency available to our experience. Contrarily, artists can use a slack tactic, a critically applied laziness, to create narrative formal works. With another few years of love and polish by Mateas and Stern, *Façade* might be exactly the Aristotelian narrative they wish it to be. Not so the works in this last section. If they were to receive more thought and care, their sloppy potency, their shapely shitiness, would only gather into more piles, but not be any more sophisticated or noteworthy. This last section outlines some “artfully shitty” narrative structures that buckle under their own abject weight, under the unnerving presence of non-symbolic stuff that threatens us from beyond our symbolic order.



Figure 6-10 A television sketch in *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* features Casey, an abused, mentally disabled boy, vomiting in stage fright.

The surrealist sketch comedy of *Tim and Eric* is a scatological composite of television sitcoms, epistemological horror, toy commercials, and amateur hour on public access channels. Similar to the accusations against Sacha Baron Cohen misrepresenting himself, Tim and Eric have been accused of being exploitive because their stable of performers includes people that are apparently elderly and senile, or whom seem psychologically unstable. Like Cactus, they site Lynch as a major influence of their work, although they interpret his films a bit differently. They argue that suspenseful horror oscillates into absurd comedy and back, the moments of fear in Lynch's work, for example, incites uncomfortable laughter as well as cringing. In their television show and live performances, they jump abruptly through sketches, in a dizzying nightmare version of 1980s television. Special guests have been Alan Thicke (the dad from *Growing Pains*), acting as a pitchman selling

diarrhea-inducing apples; Michael Gross (the dad from *Family Ties*) selling a tricked-out chair to voyeuristically watch your best friend sleep. It only takes a nudge to reveal the nauseating abyss of television, into which all of their sketches ultimately lead.

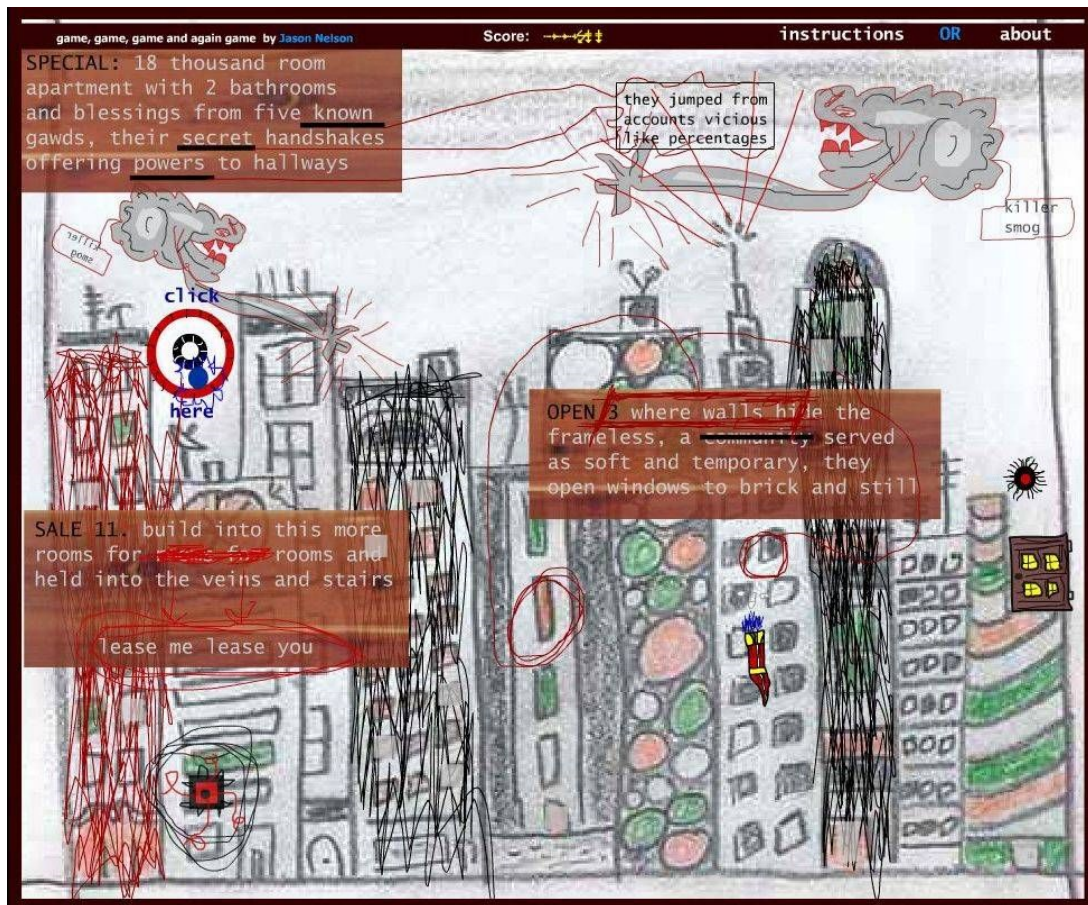


Figure 6-11 *Game, game, game and again game* presents semiotic profusion which has, counter-intuitively, a purgative and cleansing effect.

While *Tim and Eric* open up the abyss of television, *Game, game, game and again game* (2007) opens up the abyss of flow. Players are eaten up and crapped out before they know what happened. *Game, game, game...* is a 2D platformer by Jason Nelson in which the player drives a roiling scribble in a chicken-scratch world of teleports and hand-drawn bombs. Montfort described it as *Paper Mario* violated by rock and

scissors.<sup>23</sup> Visual and auditory scratches, clacking Super 8 video, text chunks addressing the player extra-diegetically, revel in their disjointed, miscellaneous natures. The obsessional, accumulative, and poorly handcrafted nature of these elements evokes the quality and position of outsider art, or perhaps, an angry third grader. The player's focus is spun apart by these elements. The onslaught of symbols, stanzas, warnings, and other crap, inundates the player into semiotic numbness. Perhaps it is "over-representational" to the point of emptying out the mechanisms of representation itself. The drive to order, conquer, manage, clean, destroy, etc., gamespace is forcibly drained through a scatological profusion. All the player wants in the end is for the game to make sense. You can play through it, but you can't shake the feeling that you aren't really winning or progressing, but rather sliding through a riddled digestive track—a hairball squeezed through flowing non-symbolic bile. The over-symbolic can have a surprisingly cleansing effect on the psychological palette, a playful purgative of all the conventional bullshit.

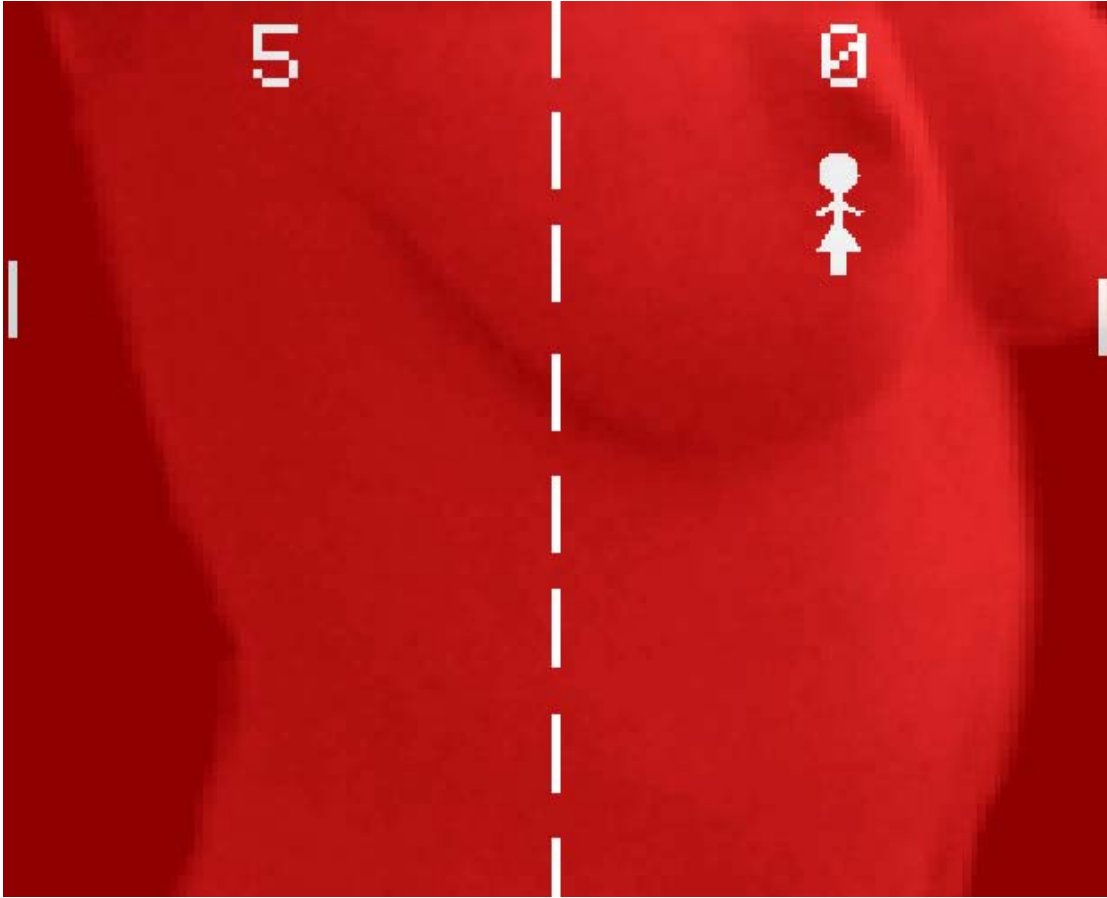


Figure 6-12 *The Intruder* appropriates mechanics from *Pong*, *Kaboom!*, *Jungle Hunt*, *Laser Blast*, and *Outlaw*, with the eponymous Jorge Luis Borges story of misogyny.

Natalie Bookchin's game, *The Intruder* (1999), opens with a jumbled transliteration of *Pong*. An arrow points to the paddle with an indicator: "You are here." Click, and the game plays as *Pong*, but with text blocks about a woman, Juliana, who is passed among two men, bounces back and forth instead of a pixilated ball. *The Intruder* is structured around a short story, *La Intrusa* (1970), by Jorge Luis Borges, about two brothers loving and fighting over Juliana, who they ultimately betray, sell to a brothel, and kill. The battle and imbroglio tightened their bond. Juliana provided a veil and foil for the brothers to embrace one another. It was: "One more link bound them now — the woman that they cruelly sacrificed and common need to forget her." The game transliterates the story in a smattering of old



console and arcade game mechanics and graphics. Events are simulated literally and allegorically, as well as represented in textual form. A woman's naked bottom shakes out soccer balls, scissors, chunks of text, etc. The player tries to catch the overflow into her rattling little bucket, a game convention that appropriates an Atari 2600 game, *Kaboom!* The convention realizes an element of the story in which Juliana collects all her earthly possessions into a bucket. The overflow of bombs is replaced with the metaphoric onslaught of feminine waste. To play *Intruder* is to play from the point of view of a feminist mocking an insecure male. It simulates, in Freudian caricature, a cliché male fear, of a bottomless, unsatisfied female sexuality—armed with irrational exuberance and laughter at his various inadequacies. The player, interpellated as male, is the intruder in a radically feminized, in the Freudian sense, gamespace that he cannot master, and will never master. We have an intruder, here, “guys,” and she's playing a very different game. The player cannot semiotically secure the correct, courageous action, there is not an electronic closure, but as we desire closure and conclusions above all else, we are left slipping to find it elsewhere.

The most incredible aspect of Bookchin's *Intruder* is her exquisite treatment of the work itself, a purposeful openness in its construction. There is a celebratory and powerful undercurrent in *The Intruder*, through its peculiar manner of craft, and it is not scatological. In *On Art and Life*, John Ruskin illuminates the power in allowing the spontaneous evidence of human handicraft to remain present in works of art:

Go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of life and liberty of every



workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all.<sup>24</sup>

*The Intruder* is open to circumstance, cyclically exposing the artist's loose and lively hand that Ruskin holds in high esteem. From the perspective of the Freudian male gaze and masculine hand, *Intruder* might feel cold in its lack of exacting craft, and disrespectful in its detachment. Random media bits from the internet leak, slip, and flood between fingers of containment and control. From the eclectically blended vision that Bookchin eloquently shapes, a sickly, dark, and sinister mood is set in motion. The cultural desire to mechanize and logically control gameworlds, becomes a foil for how technoculture mechanizes women as receptive vessels for masculine virility. To play the game, we get a sense of what it was like for Bookchin to surf the web, looking for JPEG images, super pixilated old game icons, bleeps, and sound loops, as she constructed the work. Through every stage of the game, we sense how these elements were linked up and coded together in an associative and earnest, yet also meandering, exploration of historical videogame conventions of jumping, moving, and shooting. An embodied respect and attention to the artistic process, to one's one hand, and even time (Bookchin's time as well as our time—if the player wishes, he can click through the game in seconds) is evident. A state of being that doesn't obsess upon polish-perfect artistic control sheds a light that contrasts with the mechanized misogyny modeled in the game.

The narrative formal avant-garde pulls into its gravitational field the world as it's mediated. It grabs a stone, or, a chunk, of our everyday world, and re-presents it to us, artfully altering its patterns and sensations, to push its stoniness, or chunkiness, back into the foreground. In Bookchin's work, the world feels open and

loose, in terms of craft, but it's a misogynistic world ruled by estranged games conventions. *Game, game, game* aggregates semiotic miscellanea that describe the world into a nauseating flush, ultimately purgative in its profusion. Works like *Façade* take us on a trip into the dramatic uncanny valley. *Façade* not only highlights the fact that we connect to, and identify with, flickering constructions in our media, with animated zombies pretending to be human, but in the process it reveals our own uncanniness. How, after all, could we commiserate so closely and emotionally with the flickering dead, unless we were also, at least in part, animated zombies as well?

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## CHAPTER 7: NARRATIVE POLITICAL: TRANSFORMING ENTERTAINMENT

### Fun and Politics

The narrative political avant-garde has a problem with how stories are constructed in our entertainment. It isn't *against* entertainment per se, but wishes to transform it from within, walking a precarious line. Bertolt Brecht, a key historical theorist and practitioner of the narrative political avant-garde, sees entertainment and fun as essential. Incidentally, this exposes the source of the inert and oppressive nature of the "serious games" movement, which most commonly champions sociopolitical narratives in games. The serious games movement advances games that "do not have entertainment, enjoyment or fun as their primary purpose."<sup>1</sup> The narrative avant-garde begs to differ. Entertainment and fun are necessary, powerful "weapons," according to artists like Augusto Boal, when they remain primary, when they are twinned and entangled with political narratives. Writing about the medium of theater, Brecht demands complicity through entertainment and fun:

From the first it has been the theatre's business to entertain people, as it also has of all the other arts. It is this business which always gives it its particular dignity; it needs no other passport than fun, but this it has got to have.<sup>2</sup>

Brecht's complicity above stands in relief to his pricklier side, "I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their heart warmed."<sup>3</sup> These two statements are at odds. The contradiction is key to understanding the nature of the narrative political avant-garde. Radicality and popularity—media that confronts us yet also yields

some fantasy and escape—this avant-garde strives for a strange alchemy. They want new forms of storytelling entertainment, and new social functions for this entertainment, but they understand that it can only be popular by popular demand. The paradox is axiomatic, exposing the dueling desires of wanting to be central to popular culture and marginal to it at the same time. How do you pull the margin to the center without losing alterity? For example, Brecht's play, *Threepenny Opera* (1928), was intended to lampoon the traditional musical, but audiences lapped up the mock sentimentality. Brecht loved the popularity, but hated the reason for it. Caught in a dynamic imbroglio with popular culture, they are appealing, while trying to manipulate it toward political ends. If the public doesn't enjoy the ride, if the artist betrays too much dissatisfaction with popular culture, the experience collapses into something didactic and condescending.

The philosophy of the narrative political avant-garde is not based on an inherently formal argument, such as Greenberg's argument against kitsch. It does not advance difficult art for the aesthetic edification of elites who have the training, disposition, and most importantly, the time. Its philosophy rests on the belief that dominant aesthetic regimes of entertainment affect society in incredibly complex ways. It sees the narrative structures of popular media, from novels, theater, film, television, web video, videogames, pop music, even the narratives of the news cycle, each as a stagnating, assimilating, and blinding force in society. What are the patterns? The worship of heroes, the drain of catharsis, faith in the hand of fate (revealed in the hero's perfect timing, or random act of saving grace), need for redemption, the ubiquitous three-act structure, all serve to conform society through a self-perpetuating mythical structure. The dominant narrative dichotomy of Good vs. Evil is an easy one to pry up and examine. It worms through everything, from the staged histrionics of professional wrestling, to the 2008 political rhetoric of a

messianic, pure, redemptive, and all-healing Obama versus the demonic legacy of Bush and his evil cronies. The belief in a good versus an evil cuts both ways: it drums up support to defeat “evil” foreign “dictators” (manipulation by neoconservatives, Saddam portrayed as a Nazi), as easily as it drums up support against the “evil” domestic “dictators” (manipulation by the political left, Bush portrayed as a Nazi). “Good vs. Evil” is itself a dangerous narrative device that frames the world in a mythological way that is all too familiar. It is a propaganda tool to motivate masses via predictable, irrational impulses. Not a conspiracy theory, but a way of thinking about how culture sustains and balances itself through crises. We rationalize our lives in a way that mirrors the narrative patterns of our popular media. And, our entertainment reflects the way we rationalize our lives and structure our subjective realities. To collectively gain a purchase on the way we structure our narratives is to gain a purchase on the way we structure our individual and social realities.

A founding influence of Brecht was Erwin Piscator, who had begun a “modernization” of theater in the 1920s. Brecht joined the dramaturgical collective of Piscator’s theater company that he charged with the problem of discovering and writing new kinds of plays for an “epic, political, confrontational, documentary theatre.” Building off of Piscator’s ideas, Brecht realized that theater, if done a little differently, could: 1) remain popular and entertaining; 2) engage in contemporary politics; 3) leverage the turn of modernity, e.g. seeing man and society as constructed, and therefore constructible:

Today when human character must be understood as the ‘totality of all social conditions’ the epic form is the only one that can comprehend all the

processes, which could serve the drama as materials for a fully representative picture of the world.

Theater could model the world and then turn around and affect the world through this very modeling. Piscator describes how modern theater had transformed the traditional, historical, and melodramatic theater: "In lieu of private themes we had generalisation, in lieu of what was special the typical, in lieu of accident causality. Decorativeness gave way to constructedness, Reason was put on a par with Emotion [...]" Tackling political subjects, reflexivity could be placed on par with flow.

The notion of a media that foregrounds social and scientific causality, while also revealing its own constructed nature, informed Gonzalo Frasca's master's thesis on videogames. Frasca argued in "Videogames of the Oppressed" (2001) that videogames could both model and manifest social forces through the medium's advantageous duality of being popular entertainment and a medium uniquely capable of modeling worlds to play with. Similar to what Piscator and Brecht did with theater, Frasca casts the unique affordance of videogames in terms of their dual ability *to simulate* and *to affect* reality.

Also similar to Piscator and Brecht, Frasca sees his medium better positioned and more capable than other mediums in achieving social transformation as an avant-garde. A game as a simulation "creates models that not only display the characteristics of the source system [the aspects of reality it's subjectively modeling], but also reproduce its behavior by means of a set of rules. Therefore, videogames have the potential to represent reality not as a collection of images or texts, but as a dynamic system that can evolve and change."<sup>4</sup> For Frasca, Brecht, and Piscator, social reality is alterable, and necessarily so, and this is possible for artists to do



through entertainment. Videogames model and present reality, as does theater, but on top of these the new medium also affords the plastic nature of the human world. Because videogames constitute a dynamic system, their models of reality can react to player actions in real-time. The player has agency to affect the gameworld, to cause events to happen, or not, and experience the repercussions as modeled by the system. Frasca is a resolute formalist, driven by the conviction that this feature is unique to the medium of videogames, which artists and players should deliver, demand, and develop. Videogames should leverage their procedural power to the model the world in ways that diverge from the dominant narrative regimes (again: hero-worship, dichotomy of Good vs. Evil, three-part plots, the hand of fate, catharsis, etc.), so alternate narratives can emerge and transform the way we socially construct and limit reality.

In a caveat, I must note that Frasca is too timid to affirm his vision of narrative political videogames in the bold strokes as I outline them. Frasca demurs, "When I describe these ideas to fellow researchers or game designers, they usually ask me if I really believe that social and personal change is possible through videogames. My answer is always a straight "no." Neither art [or] games can change reality, but I do believe that they can encourage people to question it and to envision possible changes." I disagree on two fronts. Videogames can materially affect our reality, as we have seen time and time again with the political avant-garde in general. However, it is on a subtler point that I also disagree. Frasca fails to grasp that our political world is itself a social collaboration and construction, a projection sustained through narratives and logics that permeate our entertainments. It is there, in our entertainment mythologies, that our narrative logic is the most exposed and plastic. If the structure is worked over on the side of narrative entertainment, the force might ripple back toward the side of the political order. Opening the dominant

structures of narrative can open the dominant social constructions of reality. The spirit of Frasca's reservations are well taken, however. It's common to seek hugely visible change, massively overpowering forces, sexy messiahs, big bombs, and bigger protests. The subtle, passive, and snail-paced forces of narrative political videogames can undermine that same dominant desire to wield explosive nuclear power.

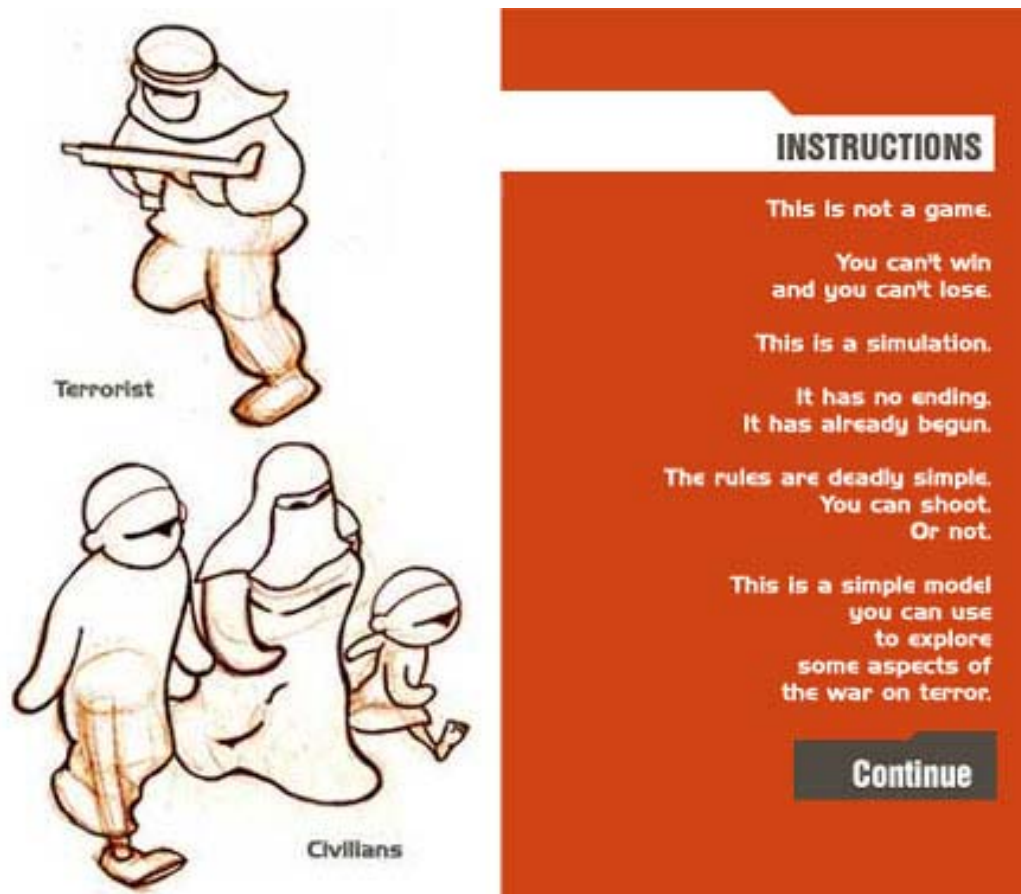


Figure 7-1 *September 12th* affords play in a gameworld that doesn't understand the logic of Western justice, and is instead governed by the logic of passive power.

Frasca's exemplary effort is *September 12th*, which I examined in the introductory chapter, so its mention here will be brief. Launch *September 12th* and find yourself gazing down in a classic isometric god-view (as in *The Sims* or *Habbo*

*Hotel*), upon a cartoony, generic Middle Eastern town. Residents monotonously circulate in narrow streets. A handful of terrorists, caricatures donning keffiyehs, mill about among them. You can aim and fire a missile to assassinate them, but a short delay prior to launch makes clean, accurate kills almost impossible. The game simulates the collateral damage of the euphemistic “surgical strike,” in which innocent bystanders still often die. When bystanders do die, nearby onlookers grieve then rage, morphing into terrorists accompanied by a bleeping sound. You can’t eliminate terrorists. In fact, the more you target for destruction, the more you create—which, frankly, is fun for a while to relish in stupidly cool, ironic fun, destroying the whole town in a click-storm. To fire is to get caught in an escalating feedback loop that is open to interpretation. The more you try to dominate, however, the more the enemy’s presence dominates. The game affords a situated feeling of resistance toward the way videogames, and the war on terror, have interpellated people into a zero-sum role of aggressor-take-all. Frantic clicking unravels the very power it playfully sets up and asserts. Whatever her politics, the player acts out Frasca’s vision, a non-zero sum philosophy of Zen detachment toward threat. There will always be bad guys who wish to hurt you, but to let them live is the most logical choice in this modeling of reality. The artistry of the game is affording pacifism in context: how does a total philosophy of peace feel when playful aggression, and upon great extension, U.S. retribution for 9/11, is just a slippery click away?

*September 12th* models a world that doesn’t understand the logic of punitive retribution that lies at the root of Judeo-Christian morality and Western justice. It doesn’t even grasp electronic closure, leaving the causal loop of control untied as the player tries to lap closed the circuit—only to be diffused into the thin air of the screen. It sees and affords a languid power in being intently passive, and what is

more taboo than digital passivity these in technoculture? From here we can compare the narrative *political* avant-garde with the narrative *formal* avant-garde. They both foreground narrative conventions and have a defamiliarizing effect. However, rather than ruminating over narrative form to confront the strangeness of being, to make stones *stony* (as it does in *formal* work), in *political* work, the circuit leads back to life in a socially-constructed, political world. A critical distance from the structuring of the narrative, of what is going on, leads toward a mediated *social* engagement, rather than a mediated *individual*, phenomenological engagement (as it does with narrative formal works, such as a Lynch film or a Cactus game). The difference in valence may sound slight, but it has major affect on the experience: narrative formal works *estrangle* (which evokes an existential attitude) whereas narrative political works *alienate* (which evokes a social attitude and drive toward reflection or reintegration). This explains why narrative political works tend to avoid themes of horror and suspense, which destabilize and psychologically isolate us as we try to regain a safe-feeling grip on mediated reality. The narrative political avant-garde defamiliarizes presentations of the world, but it does so to infect and exercise our social and political logos more than our psychological self and eros.

### **Dramatic Conventions as Avant-garde Resource**

It would be easier for a narrative political avant-garde to emerge in videogames, if mainstream conventions were more divergent, varied, and culturally representative to begin with. There would be more material for the avant-garde to rework, if, in their simulations, videogames would present more of the minutia from which we construct our everyday lives. Although Piscator and Brecht opposed traditional melodramatic theater, at the same time, it also gave them a lot to work with. The rich history of melodrama yielded hundreds of popular dramatic

conventions to manipulate into new “epic” and avant-garde forms. What are the rich melodramatic conventions that can make for similar forms in videogames? This isn’t about high art, but about what centuries of being popular art can do to spread out, enliven, and deepen a medium’s cache of conventional techniques. Consider how the diversity of popular films, novels, theater, and television, model many major themes of our everyday lives through their narratives: complicated relationships with our friends, lovers, parents, and children; alienation, grind, and treatment of work life in digital capitalism; homosexual romance; disillusion of war; the tenuous nature of faith and religion in an increasingly secular society; struggles of women, minorities, and the poor; and so on. These are the narratives of our worldly lives. The videogame industry is, for the most part, too uninterested, even too inept, to model the variety of these diverse, dramatic-to-mundane narratives. Once we’re more interested in better capturing the range of the narrative structures underwriting our everyday lives, then the narrative political avant-garde will have correspondingly rich and varied leverage to work with.

Brecht developed “epic theater,” building off Piscator’s visions for a modern theater. Epic theater is a theory and practice of a new narrative political theater. For Brecht, an alternative addition to the dominant dramatics of the early 20th century was needed, “I don’t mean that all playwrighting ought to be political propaganda, but I do feel that one shouldn’t be satisfied with just one way of writing plays. There should be several different sorts for different purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Brecht charted out a new path for dramatic entertainment by using, but transforming, existing normative conventions. There were two new, major forms of theater at the start of Brecht’s career in Germany: Naturalism and Expressionism. These had emerged amongst two older forms of theater: traditional melodrama and the longer history of Shakespearean theater. Inspired by Darwinism, Naturalist theater emerged at the

end of the 19th century, responding to the rise of cynicism or sophistication of audiences. Naturalism eschewed fantastic plots and exotic locales, demanded secular themes (spirituality, even the mention of ghosts, was taboo). Themes would be from everyday life. Actors would use everyday speech. These conventions were to secure a sense of realism and ensure that the illusion, as it so closely drew from everyday life, could best suck people into the dramatic flow. Expressionist theater contrasted with Naturalism in almost every way, but especially in highly exaggerated presentations of reality. Arising from the larger Expressionist movement in art (think Edvard Munch's *The Scream* painting of 1893), the subjects are extreme, as are their bizarre presentation. Reality is warped in portrayals of frenzied sexuality, mental illness, spiritual awakening, and abject suffering. Sets appear dreamlike rather than ordinary, with vertiginous staircases, for example. The speech of the actors is stylized or tortured, as they wax rhapsodic, freakishly mutely mime, or speak in a stilted manner.

Brecht's epic theater wasn't as rigidly "realist" as Naturalist theater, or as experimental and stylized as Expressionist theater, but it wasn't as conventional as popular melodramatic theater, either. It lived in the middle of these movements and traditions, cutting an even fresher swath between their still relatively new conventions. Brecht criticized Naturalism for being too aesthetically displeasurable, too scientific and literal. Naturalism wasn't "fun" enough, to use Brecht's criterion for successful and popular political art. He appreciated the striking aesthetics and bold psycho-emotional landscapes of Expressionist theater, especially its experimental willingness to fail in connecting with audiences—however, in general, Brecht saw the entire enterprise as circuitous. For all the artistic territory that Expressionists brilliantly broached, they never directed this new liquidity toward concrete social causes: "Expressionism vastly enriched the theatre's means of

expression and brought aesthetic gains that still remain to be exploited.” Brecht took what tricks he could from the conventions of theater available to him and pushed the medium further into the territory that Erwin Piscator first elaborated. He would use non-contemporary settings, such as the Thirty Years War centuries ago, not as an escape, but as a way to frame contemporary politics in a revealing distortion, providing audiences with a new handle on present conditions. Instead of the elaborate sets used in Naturalist theater, Brecht stripped sets down to several bare, but elaborate, elements inspired by Expressionism (such as a rotating platform onstage upon which Mother Courage’s wagon, in the play of the same name, would actually roll in place).

While Brecht saw some merit in Naturalism (less so) and Expressionism (more so), he fundamentally objected to what he called traditional Aristotelian theater, bourgeois theater, or culinary theater. It is contestable that Aristotle’s poetics of Greek tragedy is relevant to and adaptable to the forms of drama that arose in Europe and North America since the Renaissance (which itself marked the return to the classics and the emergence of neo-Aristotelianism). Jay Bolter has argued that contemporary characterization of Aristotle by Brecht, and new media theorists, are possibly deeply flawed through a misunderstanding of the specific cultural and dramatic context in which the original poetics was written. Nevertheless, even if it is a highly interpreted version of Aristotle, he is now synonymous with the dominant regime of narrative to which popular culture aspires. As examined in the previous chapter, practitioners and theorists of new media, such as Michael Mateas, use Aristotelian narrative to advance the dominant regime of Hollywood and television to articulate an ideal of narrative structure of videogames.

## Brechtian Theater

In Brechtian theater, the audience is periodically cued to the fact they're sitting in an auditorium before a stage. Mixed media intermingles with actors in the proscenium scene. Placards of text appear and disappear, film projectors flash imagery on the back wall to compete with the actors' performance. Loudspeakers announce anachronous political events. Stage lights, and the operators who manipulate them, are left exposed rather than hidden. Actors, crew, and audience are situated in a continuous space, in a single social frame, rather than as halves divided: performers/onlookers, producers/consumers. Each play becomes a little simulation of society, which includes the audience aware of its own presence. The suspension of disbelief purposely wavers between a distancing effect and immersion in the enacted play. Focus drifts into and out of the fictional conceit as the audience can't help but consider why and how the play's series of scenes are being modeled as they are. Contrast Brecht's media philosophy to Mateas and Stern's, based on Aristotle, who wished *Façade* to envelop players into a "willing suspension of disbelief." By only being half-suspended, Brecht's hope was the audience would be able to have fun and enjoy the drama as entertainment, but also be able to deconstruct the dramatic action as if it were a shared experiment, worldly argument, or sociological formula.





Figure 7-2 In the theatrical play, *Mother Courage*, text projected onstage competes with the actors for attention.

Bertolt Brecht's theatrical play, *Mother Courage* (1939), written in collaboration with Margarete Steffin, takes place during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). It was considered an allegory of contemporaneous events, and is among a number of plays Brecht orchestrated to counter the rise of militarism and fascism in Europe and Germany. Written in a month, the catalyst for *Mother Courage* was Germany's invasion of Poland, sparking the Second World War. The play centers on a family struggling to survive the midst of a war that brought unbearable hardship and famine to an entire continent. The family matriarch, Mother Courage, scrapes by selling food and supplies to soldiers. Following the army by wagon, she subjects her family to life in a war zone moving across Europe.

*Mother Courage* mildly frays apart with contradictions that are overt and subtle. It was a later work of Brecht's, so the semi-reflexive style, winking that the play is only a moment-to-moment mediated construction, was already attuned and established. To diminish the elements of surprise and suspense, a synopsis

paragraph is projected onstage summarizing, with some evident irony, what is about to take place in the next scene. Contradictions occur diegetically as well. Brecht comments on the key thematic contradiction:

At moments when, in heroic melodrama, the protagonist would be riding to the rescue, come hell or high water, Mother Courage is in the back room concluding a little deal. For her, it is emphatically not “a time for greatness.”  
*She is essentially cowardly.*<sup>6</sup>

Mother Courage as a tragic hero still makes good dramatic sense: the deaths of her children due to her mistake or flaw (hamartia, in Aristotelian terms) feel inevitable. They feel inevitable dramatically, but not logically, and the friction between these modes is palpable. Aristotle said tragedy is inevitable and unforeseeable (it all makes sense, but only in hindsight); Brechtian tragedy; on the other hand, is inevitable but also foreseeable. So why watch? It is the premise on which the plot hangs that leaves a gaping hole in the experience, preventing both cathartic and logical closure. The narrative premise is difficult to swallow: Mother Courage is taking care of her family. That’s her goal. But how does she go about it? By raising her children in the most perilous situation imaginable: among soldiers in the midst of battle. Mother Courage’s daughter is raped and facially scarred by soldiers while young, and heroically shot dead at the end of the play. Her sons of draft age are drawn into the fight one after the other, all summarily killed. Mother Courage has the unfortunate luck to disappear at the precise moments she could have saved each of her children from rape, conscription, and death. When her eldest son is taken, she’s busy niggling over some small business proposition she can’t refuse. The last scene depicts Mother Courage broken in mind but not spirit running offstage to catch up with the army that suckled then consumed her family.

The audience can't fully identify with Mother Courage, nor fully reject her; we are moved to sympathy, and then alienated by her uncanny behavior. However, the audience's drive to consume the work in pure tragic form, to feel unmitigated empathy, can overpower Brecht's narrative ingenuity. Mother Courage's daughter, spiritless, mutilated, and mute, heroically dies in the end a martyr. She is tragically shot, banging a warning drum on the roof of a barn to save a nearby village from a surprise invasion from the same army that sustained but ruined, and will momentarily take, her life. Satisfaction in her honorable vengeance pierces the cool veil of irony... but then again, she is only a secondary character... in context with the rest of the play, the way the daughter's righteous death is so perfectly tragic and poetic, makes Mother Courage even more of an enigmatically idiotic, non-poetic character.

The success of Brecht as a playwright, indeed the success of narrative politics itself, exploits ambiguity: traditional dramatic structures are built up but then exposed as rotted. They are invoked and then undercut. The experience swings back and forth, or up and down, between warm immersion and cool surface reflection. The effect is a loosely episodic presentation that is on the one hand comically tragic, and on the other, rhetorical, technical, and if the audience is so inclined, casually scientific. Walter Benjamin described the experience of a Brecht play as helping us watch half-dedicated, as if half-reclined on a chaise lounge, rather than weighed into the seat with emotion, or titillated to the seat's edge in anticipation. In ludic terms, we might say that the familiar, dramatic ground of the play is there, but it is there to present a rhetorical simulation. A soft critical distance cuts an opening through the experience for us to think. Mother Courage becomes a kind of avatar. It's impossible not to imagine alternate courses she could have taken within the scenario, even if

only imagining live how the plot should be unfolding more conventionally. We expect *Mother Courage* to have some sort of course-correcting epiphany, or at least to be killed to close the tragic cycle—but she only hovers unharmed and unchanged through a roller-coaster of tragedy. *Mother Courage* never learns to play the game any better than her first attempts. Like lives in a videogame, the serial deaths and tragedies of her children don't mean anything. She's a willfully ignorant player who's never punished. *Her* mortal life flows by perfectly as everyone else's is brutal, painful, and cut short. Brecht hoped this would help spur the audience to reconsider their complicity in the momentous rise of fascist Germany, their own hovering and inaction contributing to the coming disaster. *Mother Courage* casts Europe as a solution space in which the audience could, at least partially, rewrite the rules if only they could learn to frame it as such, to detach and reorient themselves to it, and see it as a finite, malleable matrix.

## Brechtian Gameplay



Figure 7-3 The player's avatar in *Darfur is Dying* is a starving refugee, raped if female, and slain by marauding Janjaweed regardless of gender.

*Darfur is Dying* (2006) is a browser game designed by Susana Ruiz about the state-sponsored, ethnic genocide in Darfur, Sudan. The player forages for water in a desolate landscape and tries to sustain a refugee camp repeatedly pillaged by Janjaweed, “devil on horseback,” fighters, who rape and kill them. It’s unclear how to manage the camp as one critic remarked, “I was struck with how my initial confusion at the relatively small number of tasks and variables to maintain, mirrors in some ways my relationship to the actual situation in Darfur.”<sup>7</sup> *Darfur is Dying* breaks from the standard game convention of clear instruction and control, and solid exposition leading to smooth, buttery action. This does not detract from the game because the confusion helps model the dire situation of a disoriented and weak

refugee. Players choose a member of a refugee family: an adult male, a female, or a child. But it's a false choice. If the player chooses a man to forage for water, the game prevents it, as the Janjaweed would surely execute him. *Darfur is Dying* intermittently interrupts gameplay non-diegetically as well. The player will suddenly be asked to leave the game to email a state representative or the president, to start a Sudan divestment movement on their campus, or discover other ways to help. The extensive, repeated list of real world actions available to the comparatively rich, highly mobile, and networked player, painfully contrasts with the confusing, emasculating gameplay without options. The game interrupts its own fictional flow by reworking the internet convention of the pop-up advertisement, except the ads are about Darfur. The official website of *Darfur is Dying* frames the work not as a videogame but, "narrative-based simulation," with intent to distance itself from their cultural frame of "entertainment."<sup>8</sup> That is regrettable because the work eloquently draws into itself the battle over videogames as an entertainment medium. It models its own case, its own argument. It shows that when videogames get entangled in social politics, their flow and fun bleed through the game into far-flung pockets of technoculture.

Narrative political works may afford emotional identification, empathy, and even catharsis, but they don't design these to be dissipated diegetically within the work's fiction—we are not left logically cleansed and erotically spent. And although the little fictions of raped and killed caricatures of women and children may trick up empathy, that "resource" is smuggled out of the gameworld and woven through the internet into corporations, governments, and campuses, to have some affect on the remote situation on the ground in Darfur (even if the effect is negligible). Closure may be achieved, but through material action, not fictional victories, not through a righteous vengeance of slaughtering a swarm of Janjaweed militiamen in electronic

closure, as we would expect from the traditional closure of heroic justice in games. By seducing people into taking literal actions, or by weaving a contemporary social tragedy into its form, irrational connections are made. But they are made with correlates in the social world, rather than with fictional correlates (or with the mystery of being, etc., occurring in narrative formal works).

## **The Flow of Fate**

In what Brecht called Aristotelian drama, the focus is not on social structures, which might be corrected by political action. Instead, the audience's emotional engagement lies with the fate of fictional characters. Aristotelian drama—that is, Greek tragedy—takes place in a universe ruled by forces outside of humanity's control: fate itself and the Greek gods as arbiters of fate. Of course in Brecht's day, none of the major, popular dramatic traditions overtly followed this theology, implicating the gods, for example. When Brecht objected to the role of fate in drama, he meant the way in which the action seemed inevitable and inexplicable—beyond the control of the characters. To accept dramatic fate was an analogue for assimilating into society's existing power structures. For the avant-garde, Aristotelian drama is essentially conservative, even when it portrays liberal topics. In Brecht's view there is actually an underlying political purpose to dramatic empathy: to drain the audience of the impulse to affect their own social structures. We still pity and fear for heroes in media, as Aristotle advocated, not for our neighbors.

The tripartite plot is key to evoking a sense of fate: exposition in the beginning, conflict builds to crisis in the middle, and conflict is resolved, for better or worse, in the end. The more fitting yet unexpected the ending, the better. This is

how our experiences of videogames, film, web video, and television, are framed. The special challenge videogames face is the need to draw out the crisis, or climax, of the experience to sustain attenuated activity for the entire game. Not only does an entire 40-hour game follow an Aristotelian framework, but each individual level, and even sections of levels, where a constant flow of perfect challenges demand immediate action. Videogames perpetually delay a final dramatic closure, but must make it seem a complete resolution will occur if the player can execute just one more heroic act. Dramatic closure is buckled down into a circuit of engagement, into an “electronic closure” instead. Murray laments this fact in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*: “electronic closure occurs when a work’s structure, though not its plot, is understood. This closure involves a cognitive activity at one remove from the usual pleasures of hearing a story. The story itself has not resolved.” There can’t be too much of a resolution, or an emotional release, in the gameplay, because the story must go on. In their dominant form, videogames are weak in their powers of narrative because the story must follow the flow and serve its structure foremost.

Players exercise freewill, but videogames pull them into a flow through the strongest closures possible, even if they are primarily electronic. Contrast this normative convention with Brecht’s political theater, which avoids the flow of pre-orchestrated fate:

Non-Aristotelian drama would at all costs avoid bundling together the events portrayed and presenting them as an inexorable fate, to which the human being is handed over helpless despite the beauty and significance of his reactions; on the contrary, it is precisely this fate that it would study closely, showing it up as of human contriving.<sup>9</sup>



For context, consider that Brecht is advocating a form of art that is anathema to Roger Ebert's understanding of art. The reason Ebert believes videogames cannot be art is because games depend on an infamously unreliable player. Fate in theater or film is expressed via a clinching moment in time that's guaranteed to happen unless the power goes out. Following the Aristotelian model, Ebert assumes fate to be a necessary feature of art, and the fact that games can't express fate is the very reason they are incapable of being art:

If you can go through "every emotional journey available," doesn't that devalue each and every one of them? Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices. [...] I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist. Would "Romeo and Juliet" have been better with a different ending?

Ebert provides a useful foil to explicate a point. Ebert fails to understand is that fate in videogames exists, just not in one clinching moment of time. Fate in games is diffused throughout the simulation. Fate expands like a cloud, saturating the entire solution space so that all roads lead back to Rome. In the film *Batman*, there is that one moment in which the hero will save Gotham City. In a videogame you, the hero, may or may save the city, but the solution space directly forces, and indirectly seduces, you to try to save it. You cannot chose a life of crime, or become Spiderman, and every step of progress in becoming the dark knight, is rewarded, every step from that path, punished. Even in emergent gameplay, what players may or may not do is determined by what the game design affords. Players are interpellated, or called forth, to play through the art of game design. For example, *Fantastic Contraption*, a physics-based game, boasts a wide range of solutions, but the beginning and end are meticulously predetermined—the player must get a ball from

point A to point B. Launch the game and you can feel the goal hovering in your face like a fat carrot. The player is contained in a fated solution space even if it cannot be predicted exactly how she will operate within it. The flow calls you. Videogames do not have any formal advantage over theater in the elimination of fate. Actually, they may be worse off because the medium is that much better at hiding inevitability within the rules of the game and in the boundaries of its flow channels.



Figure 7-4 An invisible “Director” in *Left 4 Dead* dynamically manages the music and flow of enemies so gameplay always feels like a climactic moment of a film.

*Faade* exquisitely half-fails in its Aristotelian endeavor because its goal lay partially beyond its creators’ reach. The game industry gives itself no such luxury, because failure is not an option. The game community frames narratives through the lens of electronic closure because that is what it understands game narratives to be, essentially, even in role-playing games, which draw out the richest and most epic narratives in games. Narrative is supposed to be subservient to gameplay, and

gameplay subservient to flow. *Left 4 Dead* (2008), a survival horror and cooperative FPS game, harnesses a dynamic system to stage dramatic elements to control pacing and presentation. Valve calls the central AI agent that manages flow, “The Director,” because it as if a film director is following the player, managing the lighting, music composition, and dialogue in real-time to most powerfully evoke the level of severity of the situation at hand. If the player is blowing zombies away, the music is heroic with major tones, if she is fleeing and bleeding, the music and lighting become appropriately disturbed. The Director ensures a negative feedback loop which always bring the level of action to the ideal baseline of “about to die, just barely making it through,” this is opposite to the positive feedback loop of *September 12th*, in which each click multiplies enemies beyond managerial control. In *Left 4 Dead* heroic moments are soon flooded with flow-stuffing threats (to regulate flow), and if the player is poorly skilled, the flow of zombies mysteriously dissipates (the effect is quite eerie, actually, as the game condescendingly acknowledges that you suck, by visibly making it all easier and calming down the music in real-time). Valve calls *Left 4 Dead* “procedural narrative,” using the exact terminology Mateas and Stern used to describe *Façade*.<sup>10</sup> The main difference is that *Façade* moves on dialogue, and *Left 4 Dead* generates dialogue as an auxiliary (as it is in violent scenes in action horror films). Because of its commercial scope, *Left 4 Dead* manages more complex gameplay and aesthetics. *Left 4 Dead* models a world in which the player is *fated* to win with white-knuckles, to consistently snatch victory from the jaws of defeat every few minutes. Heroism is all but inevitable. Inevitability is integral to the idea of the perfectly organic, Aristotelian drama: the end should be contained in the beginning, in the exposition of the heroes and the challenges they face whether it is a zombie apocalypse to a lover’s betrayal.

## Gameplay Beyond Fate

Does a satisfying resolution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine seem fated to happen? What if a game were to model that situation, not with the intent of making it seem imminently solvable, but of playfully exposing the complicated, messy reasons why it is actually so intractable to resolve?



Figure 7-5 Actual news footage interrupts the cartoon aesthetic in the game, *PeaceMaker*.

*PeaceMaker* (2007) by ImpactGames, is a turn-based strategy game in which you play either the role of the Palestinian President or Israeli Prime Minister. In either case, the objective is to achieve a peaceful and prosperous two-state solution, while winning broad support from one's own side. The resources at the player's disposal are the police and the military, water supply and roads, diplomatic

channels, national and international media, and other infrastructures. The game begins with a historical overview of the conflict, making a condensed presentation showing how the region has repeatedly erupted into violence over the past seventy years. *PeaceMaker* is unyielding. Players tend to fail replay after replay and often never win. The more knowledge they have about the nature of the conflict, and understand the histories of how both sides have responded over the decades to external and internal violence can prove vital. Really two games in one, the game models asymmetrical “peacefare” (as opposed to warfare). On the Palestinian side, the player faces incredible limitations economically (the infrastructure is in ruins and there is little in tax revenue and foreign aid), militarily (which can only be used against her own people), and politically (as Hamas challenges or disavows the government and continues to carry out terror attacks against Israel). The Palestinian president job involves influencing world opinion, giving hopeful speeches, and constantly asking for international aid and investment, as well as for Israeli concessions. For the Israeli side, there are more options and greater potential for violence to spiral out of control. If the player responds to a Hamas terror attack with a surgical strike against a militant leader, the Palestinian people and government will be far less willing and able to negotiate with and reign in their own extremists. The game argues that the Israeli Prime Minister would do best to ensure the Palestinian president is in the best possible position to reign in terrorists, but not to depend solely on the Palestinian president to accomplish this goal.

*PeaceMaker* uses aesthetic discord to connect in-game actions to real world consequences. The game uses the characteristically iconographic and semi-cartoony graphics of real time strategy games, such as the *StarCraft* series. But as a flailing player faces terror attacks in the game, news footage of actual carnage is cued to jar the player from that aesthetic, and also from the flow. External connections are

made. Players usually fall from the flow when a game gets too hard or easy. Here, the player is momentarily kicked from the game for a didactic reason: to reflect on aspects of the world the work has correlated into its model. Bloody footage of dead children reminds the player that a slick flash game is only a veil. The player is less inclined towards empathizing with the fictional events and characters in the game than orienting themselves analytically to them so they may understand the forces at work behind the material violence in the Middle East.

### **Gameplay Beyond Empathy**

The problem with empathy is it evokes a sense of closure to the work. In narrative political works emotion isn't the enemy, but more like a volatile substance to be indulged but also carefully monitored (I'm well aware of how "stereotypically German" this sounds) so the work also remains open and analytical. Brecht did not want to eliminate emotional response in political theater:

The rejection of empathy is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to such. The crude aesthetic thesis that the emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong. None the less a non-aristotelian dramaturgy has to apply a cautious criticism to the emotions which it aims at and incorporates.

The goal was to mix emotions with an analytical mood. In hybrid fashion, Brecht placed Aristotelian theater at one end of a spectrum and Dada, the radical political avant-garde, at the other. Both were necessary for political drama, but only in select, interlocking ways. Just as empathy with fictional characters was to be avoided, so was the comical mania of Dada: "Certain artistic tendencies like the provocative

behaviour of Futurists and Dadaists and the icing-up of music point to a crisis of the emotions.”<sup>11</sup> Hysterical crisis and gut-wrenching empathy are both antithetical to Brechtian entertainment. Each realizes emotional closure, albeit in different ways. With empathy, we identify with the characters and their situation. In a “crisis of emotions” we dis-identify, like when audiences at Dada events rushed the stage in protest. For works to remain open there must be emotions in play, always searching for an exit, for the closure to their desire, but never wholly finding it and then dissipating.

If people do empathize, it should not be with the fictional characters portrayed onstage or onscreen, but with the actual warm-blooded actors onstage, or the actual political subjects referred to in the real world, whether it is people in Darfur or Jerusalem. Brecht criticized traditional acting, where performers usually act by “means of hypnosis. They go into a trance and take the audience with them.” Brecht proposed an acting style that undermined its own illusion: “The actor must show his subject, and he must show himself.”<sup>12</sup> Augusto Boal, a contemporary political playwright, activist, and theorist has further developed Brecht’s work. Boal summarizes a difference in how characters work in Aristotelian theater versus Brechtian theater:

Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character.<sup>13</sup>

It sounds like Boal is describing a formal difference between theater and games. You have to think and act for your game character to progress. However, what if your character conspires against you? Film theorist Robert Stam points out, “Brechtian distantation, after all, can only be effective if there is something—an emotion, a desire—to *be* distanced.”<sup>14</sup> What if the conventional desire to identify with your avatar (as ego vessel and vehicle to attain procedural mastery) is what the avatar is designed to help you resist? What if, by artfully resisting your immediate commands, something else can surface in the experience, so you may grab hold of it, and actively dissect the mechanics of our own desire?



Figure 7-6 Players feel like quitting as they play bad Kinko's employees in *Disaffected!*



*PeaceMaker* chips away at the sense of fate by chafing flow with real world political information and aesthetic disruptions in the form of news footage. *Disaffected!* (2006) chips away at fate by making the player feel like quitting. *Disaffected!* is a videogame parody of FedEx Kinko's created by Persuasive Games. The player is an employee running around filling customer orders in a similar manner to *Tapper* or *Diner Dash*. The challenges involve time management and memorization of what orders go to whom. Periodically, the player's avatar mumbles "I don't feel like working" and walks backwards, away from where you are guiding him. Just as live actors in Brecht's play were instructed to "under act" (the inverse of "over acting") so they may foster an analytical mood in the audience, the control mechanic of an avatar can accomplish something similar. The disaffected Kinko's avatar becomes literally dysfunctional. This introduces dissonance, causing the player to refocus attention on the social and material codes underlying the game mechanic. The sudden emphasis on operations in *Disaffected!* is enhanced with the muttering speech of the avatar. It is as if he is actually saying: "I don't feel like letting you control me right now." What's the meaning of the avatar's defection? According to the game's website:

Disaffected! gives the player the chance to step into the demotivated position of real FedEx Kinkos employees. Feel the indifference of these purple-shirted malcontents first-hand, and consider the possible reasons behind their malaise—is it mere incompetence? Managerial affliction? Unseen but serious labor issues?<sup>15</sup>

Most criticism of *Disaffected!* is about not being fun enough: "playing a game intended to showcase apathy, frustration, and boredom, strangely enough, leaves one feeling apathetic, frustrated and bored."<sup>16</sup> A minority sees this as the point: "I

could actually feel myself getting angry and depressed, and my sense of self-worth going right through the floor, as I played. That's what makes it so brilliant." Some take the opposite view regarding apathy: "I can see that the game could leave someone frustrated or bored, though the fact that it has inspired discussion seems to be an argument against apathy."<sup>17</sup> Feeling the desire to quit the game welling up inside you during play, might mirror the same desire a Kinko's employee feels. As the community matures, fractures, and spreads, perhaps more people will consider a novel unworking of conventional gameplay as an inherently fun experience that is also uncomfortable.

### **Alienation as Key Affordance**

Videogames with an agenda, serious games, persuasive games, propaganda games, and so on, have been gaining popularity for years now. Therefore, it's worth describing these new genres in context with a narrative political avant-garde work, to compare and contrast. To simplify, let's focus on the approach of "persuasive games." In his book, *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost argues that videogames are an expressive art because they can model rhetorical arguments: "all kinds of videogames, from mass-market commercial products to obscure art objects, possess the power to mount equally meaningful expression."<sup>18</sup> Following ludology, Bogost believes that the fundamental quality of videogames, and presumably all software, arises from its procedurality, "this power lies in the very way videogames mount claims through procedural rhetorics."<sup>19</sup> And finally, his explication of procedural rhetoric is revealing:

Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails

persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively.

Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words and images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation these rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming.<sup>20</sup>

I'll bracket my critique of Bogost's semiological flattening of videogames as art, first to "expression," and further to "rhetorical argument," because I have addressed the ahistorical (in light of much of 20th century art history) nature of these claims in the radical formal chapter. Bogost's thin framing of videogames as "procedural rhetoric" is, however, a useful way to demonstrate how the avant-garde digs a bit deeper than just modeling arguments.



Figure 7-7 *McDonald's Video Game* is an ironic, fun parody but it fails to alienate players or open up the experience, and therefore it is not an avant-garde work.

A videogame can model an argument about our political reality, but that doesn't make it avant-garde. The narrative political avant-garde requires an element of alienation. The game experience needs to be readily deconstructable by the player as a media artifact that is embedded in a larger political frame. The flow must have some sort of latency, reverb, or swirling eddy. But if it is a neatly closed system that reliably serves up sweet dishes of electronic closure on demand, it can only serve the flow ideal and not be avant-garde. *McDonald's Video Game* (2006) by the Italian game developer, Molleindustria, is a political videogame parody of the eponymous corporation. As a tycoon game, players simultaneously manage the multinational behemoth in four major divisions: farming, slaughterhouse, corporate (lobbying and marketing), and restaurant management. In the farmland, villages teeming with natives can be razed and cleared, and pastures permanently poisoned with urine

and feces. In the slaughterhouse, hormones and industrial waste can be added to the fodder, which make cows fatter but unhealthy, possibly sickening consumers. In the restaurant, cooks who spit in burgers may be dispatched with a click. At corporate headquarters public officials may be bribed, and marketing campaigns targeting children can be designed and launched.

*McDonald's Video Game* is not alienating, but cute fun with a naughty twinge to it, in the Adult Swim style. As a *game* it's good and worth your twenty minutes. However, it fails as an *avant-garde* game, which may or may not have been Molleindustria's intent. Nothing is easier to shotgun and consume, nothing is more cliché in entertainment, than laying it into The Man, the capitalist system, the corruption of the political order, and so on. These the game dishes up in pungent fatty flavors, but these flavors are familiar. The shtick scales incredibly well: the narrative of the blockbuster film *Avatar* is based on the evils of capitalism and raked in a billion dollars in revenue, while *South Park* shits on Christ. Who defends McDonald's as a paragon of virtue? If it is defended, it is as a business that exists for profit, as a service that delivers high calories for few dollars. If the player has never played a tycoon or god game before, it would alienate but by accident. The Slick Fisher Price aesthetics and mechanics of *McDonald's Game* render its experience familiar and smoothly ironic. It *appears* subversive but pulls the player into the procedural loop of electronic closure and never spits her out. It is subversive to the status but not itself. The critical force only points outwards, never inwards, or at you, the masterful player vying to win.

*McDonald's Video Game* is polished to the point of negating its own argument, or even reversing it entirely. Running McDonald's seems hard, but not impossible. Most importantly, players soon learn that the most successful strategy is to keep

corporate practices just above mainstream ethical limits. We, and McDonald's, may be crooked enough to maximize profits, but we need to be minimally honest enough to stay within the law. For example, it's more profitable to leave the villages intact, rotate crops to maintain nutrient levels, and keep your employees happy. Bribing officials is often a waste of money. Suddenly, McDonald's seems a bit like *us*, just trying to get by in life, pushing the rules where they'll bend without breaking. Online chatter shows players generally treat it no differently than *SimCity* or *Railroad Tycoon*, praising the addictive nature of its gameplay, passing on shortcuts, tactics, and tricks to win. Actual business practice, the capitalist system that the game models, is ironically, off-topic. Player discussions on juggling variables read like a junior corporate-training cabal. *McDonald's Video Game* wants to be a critical simulation, but it has the opposite effect, vindicating the corporate order, as a min-maxing challenge, rather than irrevocably poking holes through it. In short, the game does successfully model a rhetorical argument, but the argument is flushed undigested through the familiar flow channel of gameplay so nothing sticks. To stretch the point, it seems like a game that a slightly edgier, future McDonald's corporation might even actually endorse in order to appeal to hipster kids.

If *McDonald's Video Game* were to crack its frame of argument open in any way, it would be a narratively political avant-garde work. The argument wouldn't need to be any more developed, but its delivery would have to be. The model it presents of the world would affect the gameplay on a meta-level. *September 12th* works as a narrative political work because the argument against Western justice is modeled in the structure of the game, bending back the flow, forcing a confrontation with the logical ethic of using violence to quell threats of violence. In avant-garde works, alienation cuts through the flow periodically. This gives the player opportunity to experience immediacy with the narrative, but also experience it from

a distant and detached manner. Both distances are necessary for the alchemy to happen, for the work to function in an avant-garde way. The key is oscillation and division, a shifting frame of reference that moves back and forth, and an acute incommensurability between these frames. For example, if the aesthetics of *McDonald's Game* were conflicted, that would let some air into the hermetically sealed, sweetly looping electronic closure. Then the game would give the player some slack with which to actually do some reflexive work. This could occur, for example, if the cute aesthetic of customers munching burgers were juxtaposed with realistic, gritty videos of surgeries treating atherosclerosis (similar to how the two dominant aesthetics of *PeaceMaker* clash). Narrative political works don't have to avoid the sleek style of mainstream games, but if they do idealize flow, they also have to contaminate it in some way, beaming aliens into the familiar crowd. Otherwise, they are just another entertainment product that perpetuates and conserves current tradition.

### **Progressive Entertainment as Conservative**

Brecht theorized and practiced theater, and was embedded in this same apparatus he desired to transform. In contrast, Boal lays heavy criticism upon all kinds of entertainment, even though his work is, like Brecht's, mostly in theater. Although they are cut from the same political cloth Brecht and Boal diverge in the temperatures of their style. Brecht was ambivalent toward entertainment, whereas Boal is militant to the degree that Brecht seems docile in comparison. Boal sees the dominant narrative-political order as cancerous and metastasized through all media. The penetration and power of his enemy, as he envisions it, drives him into guerrilla-style polemics: "theater is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it."<sup>21</sup> He argues that empathy with fictional characters is

sinister: "Empathy must be understood as the terrible weapon it really is. Empathy is the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and related arts (movies and TV)... man relinquishes power of decision to the image."<sup>22</sup> Boal reserves the most unabashed derision for popular film and television coming from, or modeled after, the U.S.:

A love story, no matter how simple it may be, can be the vehicle of values of another universe which is not that of the spectator. I am convinced that Hollywood has done more damage to our countries with the "innocent" movies than with those that deal directly with more or less political themes. Idiotic love stories of the type *Love Story* are most dangerous, given the fact that their ideological penetration takes place subliminally; the romantic love hero works untiringly to win the woman's love, the bad boss reforms and becomes good (and goes on being the boss), etc.

It is for similar reasons that ostensibly liberal films, such as *Wall Street* by Oliver Stone (or TV series, like *Mad Men*) are actually "conservative," if by that we mean strengthening the existing "traditions" and present socioeconomic order. *Wall Street* is about the corrupting force of late capitalism on its face, but Žižek has argued that this theme is saturated with another theme that is more primal. Stone models a logical argument against greed in *Wall Street* (1987). But, because Stone places the source of virility and social dominance within greed, the logical argument is overshadowed and reversed by a more sexually potent argument embodied in the antagonist. The official bad guy, Gordon Gecko (played by Michael Douglas), is alpha male and libidinal focus, the charismatic role the viewer desires to become, to absorb his intensely dominating and overtly sexual nature. In short, the film makes capitalism seem cruel and relentless, but also as seductive as it is dangerous. The



New York Times said on the film's release, "The movie appears to be celebrating the very world into which Bud Fox [Charlie Sheen] has moved, finally, with such qualms."<sup>23</sup> As Gilmore and Joseph argue in the book, *Authenticity*, the most effective way to sell authenticity in contemporary culture is to expose your own constructedness from the start. Inauthentic is the new authentic. *Wall Street* tips its own hand, making its case even more authentic: yes, yes, this is all very messy and brutal and disgusting, I'm not going to lie to you. But hey, play the game right and you fuck all these women, squish men as ants, create and crush worlds like a demiurge.

### Liquefying Mediums



Figure 7-8 Rock drawing in ancient South Africa was once the sole domain of shamans, before the practice spread to other members of San culture.

We need to expand our view of what the narrative political avant-garde has advocated and done historically to understand how it might function with videogames, entertainment, and social media in general. In their paper, "That Recurrent Suspicion: Democratization in a Global Perspective," Tehranian and Tehranian argue that the emergence of each new medium brings with it a "new communication elite that masters the use of that particular technology and thus assumes a leading role in developing new mediating ideologies and institutions."<sup>24</sup> The inventions of writing, print, and the internet, are favored mediums in the study of media democratization, but we can look further back and see a trend even more remote.

The material trace of the origins of human speech and song remain buried in prehistory. Performance and theater use the body as their medium, so their origins are hard to pinpoint. Drawing is made of the material trace, however, and its historical advent as a medium is still visible in a few scattered locations. According to cognitive archaeologist, J. David Lewis-Williams, the first recorded mark-makers, the people who scrawled on cave and rock walls in the antiquities of South Africa to North America, were a few elite members of society, most often shamans.<sup>25</sup> Lewis-Williams argues, for example, that in early San (or Bushmen) culture in South Africa drawing was the exclusive domain of shamans who used it to record their visions, but that the practice eventually expanded to other members of society. The second wave of San mark makers were girls, who in their rites of passage would also record their visions, adding their traces alongside the traces of the shamans. In time, other members of society would mark-make images in increasingly varied rituals, until everyone in the community at some point would take on that role and ritual.

Approaching modernity, the lateral pressure on the powers of mediation becomes more acute and self-reflexive. We are aware of mediums as mediums, and this affects how we use and politicize them. When the printing press was invented, competing social forces worked actively to spread accessibility of the medium, or, conversely worked to repress its spread and the social effects it caused. The trend in modernity is for lateral pressure to dominate the censoring opposition. The birth of mass printed erotica, to journals of natural philosophy, to the bible, each spread specialized interests, knowledge, and agency, affecting all classes of society, breaking old hierarchies of control. The mass publication of scientific theories and experiments afforded the now essential peer-review; the mass printed bible enabled Protestantism as laity could finally interpret the text without priestly aid.

The process I have described has been called the “democratization of media,” or the “democratization of communication.” Philip Lee uses the term “democratization” himself, in his 1995 book *The Democratization of Communication* but he questions the term’s grasp of the global historical processes of social media. Democratization has been “too narrowly conceived in terms of the Western historical experiences,” namely, the idealized direct democracy of ancient Athens working through, “the cataclysms of the liberal democratic revolutions of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.”<sup>26</sup> Lee’s solution is to define democracy in philosophical terms that supposedly break from Western history to better represent a globally historical, ethnically, regionally, and nationally agnostic, kind of democracy. A bigger problem arises from the question of political hegemony. Alain Badiou questions the academic axiom of placing democracy as superior over all other forms of government, and the odd problem academics face: “not being democratic is regarded as pathological.”<sup>27</sup> Having no desire to go to such lengths as Lee, or to engage the debate over the merits of democracy itself, I propose another

solution. It is simple, yet purposely clumsy, and slippery in its analogy. To sidestep the neo-colonial baggage that “democratization” carries with it, I propose a usefully awkward term that exposes contingency rather than trying to hide it, or trying to master it.

I suggest *liquefy* or *liquefaction* as a better way to capture the cultural-technical process mischaracterized as media “democratization” above. Liquefaction evokes a spreading, but also a lack of a centralized push. It also affords a sense of pulling outwards, as through gravity. Liquid, as we are familiar with it in our daily lives, is attracted to a lowest common denominator, as when a water dribble trickles whichever way it can across subtle dents of a table. In this analogy, it is the gravity and texture of social relations that pull media apart, even as it holds it together through the physical “convention” of surface tension. Culture has a contradictory desire for meaning to be both stable and fluid. We like tropes, but want them to twist. Medium as “liquid” imagines them as lubricating society, facilitating new kinds of connections, and modes of engaging one another. Liquefying mediums afford social bonds to swell out, not by the fiat of institutions, but by a pooling aggregate of bodies, ideas, and impulses using media in a multitude of expression. As I discussed in the radical political chapter, I am not arguing that institutional, governmental, or economic forces, do not still exert incredible power in technocultural media. In fact, it is often much easier for them to exert power through digital networks, as Thacker and Galloway have explained in *The Exploit*. What it does, mean, however, is that, that same power is also slippery, contingent, convertible, and accessible to masses of people and individuals.

In modernity, the liquefaction of mediums becomes acute and self-reflexive—this impulse is economic, technological, and cultural. Economically, consumer

products, from 70s handycams made video more accessible and producible by a growing public. Advances in technology made it cheap enough. Convergence culture is the motivating force for us to blend and remix media. Narrative political figures like Brecht and Boal highlight this process playing out. They hone in on it, facilitating, fueling, accelerating, and guiding this process toward more avant-garde ends. The objective of the narrative political avant-garde is twofold: 1) to transform an entertainment, a popular medium, at least in some part, into a political force 2) to make it creatively available to all parts of society to use as they see fit. For the first part of the objective, instead of destroying popular theater, Brecht wanted to ride it out and augment it. He spoke of theater as an “apparatus,” as a social machine. As a machine, it can be refitted and reconfigured without losing its cultural traction, and role as entertainment.

## **Liquefying Theater**

The problem with the apparatus of the theater, for Brecht, was that the audience serves it, instead of it serving the audience. We are seduced into theatrical entertainment on its own terms. We deposit our vision and motivation within its proscenium, and taking leave from the proscenium empty and spent. Brecht re-staged theater as a mirror, an artfully warped mirror, in which we may look into it and see ourselves, not as a fantastic escape, but as a messy social reality comprised of bundles upon bundles of causalities—without an over-arching plot. He wanted to give us and help us exercise the critical ability to see theater as entertainment, but also as a liquid medium given shape by its audiences, producers, and society in which these exist. The experiential loop of going-to-the-theater leads into the fiction onstage, but leaks back out to the audience in which you are sitting, and beyond that, the world in which we are living beyond theater walls. The avant-garde helps

us realize that theater, film, videogames, etc., always serve a social function, especially when they deny that they wield power in society:

People say, this or that is a good work; and they mean (but do not say) good for the apparatus. Yet, this apparatus is conditioned by the society of the day and only accepts what can keep it going in that society. We are free to discuss any innovation which doesn't threaten its social function [...] We are not free to discuss those which threaten to change its function, possibly by fusing it with the educational system or with the organs of mass communication.<sup>28</sup>

The idea is not to protest or shut down the apparatus of theater, but to make it work for social causes instead of pretending it is serving a simply, autonomous role. Entertainment is complicated, affecting our politics and our lives in convoluted ways. In this sense, at least, the narrative political avant-garde agrees with the radical political: both are seeking an alternative to "art for art's sake," the saccharine version of which is, "entertainment for entertainment's sake." However, the narrative political avant-garde seeks an alternative that is entertaining enough to attract mainstream audiences. To realize the liquidity of theater, it needs thousands and thousands of participating eyeballs and brains to poke it into new self-aware shapes and forms. Through a Brechtian eye we can see videogames such as *Darfur is Dying* or *PeaceMaker*, as fun and entertaining, but also as empowering players by throwing out some alienating, but useful and negotiable, experiential *slack*. Take the games as you wish. Get into them or not. We are pulled into the flow to some degree, but left loose enough to muck the medium around, linger upon it, disinterestedly dabble in it, in a more reflective and detached way—perhaps taking a break once in a while to do an internet search and poke around Wikipedia to verify claims we consider surprising.

Now for the second part of the narrative political avant-garde's goal: to make an entertainment medium creatively available to all parts of society. People should be able to reuse and refigure the medium as they see fit. In 1926 Brecht wrote in "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication":

Radio is one sided when it should be two. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle the radio should step out of the supply business and organise its listeners as suppliers.<sup>29</sup>

Brecht's vision of radio sounds curiously like the rhizomic nature of the internet. The ability to distribute media *is itself distributed* among all participants in Brecht's vision. Brecht's "vast network of pipes" comment of 1926 sounds remarkably like the late Ted Stevens's widely lampooned analogy that the internet is a "series of tubes" made in 2006. Why Brecht did not further synthesize his vision of radio with his theater praxis is a mystery. This is where Augusto Boal steps up. Boal has devised methods that redistribute power within the apparatus of theater to a broader public. Boal pushes the line Brecht might have imagined had he played more loosely, and became more populist in his understanding of theater.



Figure 7-9 Augusto Boal teaches a theater practice in which the audience and actors switch roles so power may spread among all involved in experiences of the medium.

Augusto Boal is a contemporary activist from Brazil, founding a movement called, "Theater of the Oppressed." It takes Brecht's alienating, scientific theater as a starting point, but reaches beyond it because it was not liquid enough for Boal. In Brecht's theater, the audience is still mostly passive, although they might smoke or banter as they watch the play in a fictionally detached, but socially active manner. For Boal, spectators must be enabled to breach the stage barrier itself. Spectators are empowered spectator-actors or *spectactors*. In Boal's permeable theater, audiences may walk onstage, replace the actors, and rewrite plays in real-time. A spectactor might pipe up and say they'd like to redo the last scene. Boal tries to put the apparatus of theater at full service of those it is supposed to serve. Brechtian theater demonstrates critical observations about society in general. Boalian theater



embodies the particular lives of the spectators in particular. Spectators enact their own pleasures, or their own oppressive situations, such as a woman's real life abuse by her alcoholic husband. When the force is critical, it is not just bent toward society, but toward their own individual lives and local problems. Brecht did to some extent anticipate Boal's approach, as when he handed over control of a radio play to a live call-in audience. However, Brecht never articulated an actionable, reproducible program for this kind of open theater.

To socially distribute knowledge and power over the "weapon of theater," Boal travels to rural villages and urban ghettos throughout Latin America, teaching the poor of its mechanics, and how to rework the medium according to their needs. He teaches how to transfer the empathetic image from the screen to the image of one's neighbor and oneself. It is not an overstatement that Boal proselytizes for a new means of social experiment and communication through theater. Others are picking up the mantle, running with it, and most importantly, modifying Boal's work to flood the needs of each situation in the community they encounter. Kayhan Irani helps spread Theater of the Oppressed globally, most notably to Iraq and Afghanistan, which she describes in a book she co-authored, *Telling Stories to Change the World*. In *Telling Stories*, Wahid Omar reports on the Hazaras ethnic minority in Afghanistan, recounting how women and girls are oppressed internally within their community. Their oppression internal to their group recapitulates the oppression the ethnic minority suffers as a whole within Afghan culture. Teenage girls within the community have traditionally told stories as a way of bonding, and transferring knowledge and life experience to the younger girls. This tradition was brought to the fore and given a platform using Boalian techniques. Because the storytelling of these girls could bring attention, empathy, and respect from Afghanistan at large to

the Hazaras people, the girls also found that in their stories, greater equality could be found within their own community.

Although most of the poor whom Boal instructs have never set foot in an “aristocratic,” Broadway-like theater, he believes the medium can still empower them. As a neo-Marxist, Boal wishes to empower the most oppressed layer of the social base. An alley, a dirt lot, a ramshackle home, can all become stages (more open and plastic than Broadway in many ways) to step outside of ourselves and see our private and shared lives with more agency and creativity. Theater’s strongest feature is that it can occur everywhere, and that its only essential “technology” is the human body. Boal believes to be envisioning the original cultural force of the medium:

“Theater” was the people singing in the open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for the people, and could thus be called dithyrambic song. It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. Then came the aristocracy and established divisions.<sup>30</sup>

His creative interpretation of Marxism makes for interesting fusions. Where, for Marx, productive labor was the operative measurement of value and the most basic and elemental resource, Boal pries even deeper into the materials, accessing the history and knowledge a laborer has over her own body. In the Western, “first world,” we cite the freedom of expression as the supreme example of cultural politics. But, to better understand narrative politics, remember (as examined in the radical and complicit political chapters) that it is not so much about the *expression* or crafting of messages, but rather it is about the *assertion*, the self-willing act of presenting oneself as a subject who has the power, the right and the need to exist—

and to struggle to improve one's situation. It is about people actively existing before each other and the world as self-presenting, self-motivated subjects working collectively and individually.

To remind spectators of their innate power, Boal places the axis of theatrical medium within the human body itself. The body is the reserve of theater's materiality and form. The most immediate, plastic, and profound force anyone can summon and direct comes from her body and voice:

We can begin by stating that the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive.<sup>31</sup>

Becoming fluent in the medium of the body enables us to expand our available actions as we expand from being only spectators into spectactors, from *objects*, which things happen to (like when we stare zombielike in a dark movie theater), to *subjects*, who make things happen. Participants in Boal's workshops are often illiterate, presenting extraordinary challenges in teaching broader media and theatrical literacies. By grounding their source of power within bodies, in the lifetime experience of naturally using one's body (rather than in the knowledge and mastery of a textual literacy, for example, controlled, from the poor's point of view, by the social elite), Boal equalizes the playing field. He reveals a previously hidden, but ubiquitous power source available to all regardless of official education or social standing. The public at every economic level is familiar with innumerable of forms of "acting" through the spectacles of television, folk songs, dance, movies,

newspapers, courtship rituals, political grandstanding, the list is broad as media culture itself.

The catch is that familiarity is not the same thing as agency. Literacy requires bidirectional movement: interpretation and also expression. Just because we are able to interpret something, that doesn't mean we can effectively remix and reconfigure it. Toward this end, Boal has developed an embodied pedagogy comprised of hundreds of improvisational acting games to expose, organize, and render plastic, the ways our bodies look and move in performance. The first stage is physical: slow motion exercises, wheelbarrow races, shadow boxing, etc. The second stage focuses this expressive force into nonverbal communication: mime games, animal imitation, and so on. The third stage strategically moves beyond according to narrative plots. For example, several spectactors create a "simultaneous dramaturgy" in which an improvised skit leads to a crisis, but not a solution. The spectactors stop and cue the audience for an idea, act out that resolution, and then try another, until the pool of solutions seems exhausted.

Criticism of Boal from the political left comes from academic progressives arguing that it isn't efficient or effective. Why not just teach textual literacy in the barrios, rather than acting techniques? Why not inform how to organize community groups in order to unionize, battle government corruption and electoral fraud; basically, how to engage in traditional progressive politics? Boal answers that a theater for the oppressed can't replace traditional methods of redistributing power among a base, but that such a goal is not its mandate. It is, after all, all about *transforming narrative political entertainment*. And as such, it may augment traditional political struggles, and is only really understood as one among many political strategies that should share work in improving the lot of the world. Contemporary

avant-gardes have learned that singular answers and strategies do not work, and that a diverse field of approaches can better address, interface, and transform reality.

Narrative political theater is a “rehearsal of the revolution” of everyday life. The experiential forces of openness and empowerment are activated in the microcosm so that they may circulate more maturely within the macrocosm. Experimenting with solutions to personal and social troubles is itself an achievement, but more critical is the fact that such practices conjure material agency in our private and communal lives. It breaks the sense of inevitability that can make present conditions and crises appear so interlocked and hopeless, especially to the worst off economically and politically. As spectactors grow in flexibility, depth, and boldness, politically manipulating the narratives of entertainment, they grow in ability restructuring the civic narratives that order and limit their social realities.

### **Liquefying Video (Participatory Narcissism)**

A way to discern how videogames may liquefy in the coming years is by comparing the history and present condition of video as a medium. In the radical formal chapter I claimed that a medium has three formal supports: material technology, cultural conventions and our capacity to sense it (its unique signature in the “human sensorium,” to use McLuhan’s phrase). So we may imagine that each artistic medium uses three legs to both exist and to move its structure over time. An alternating stability between these legs allows a medium to shift and transform while still being more or less recognizable as the same medium. The photographic unit is still the picture, which is collected into albums, and it still snaps faces and people, but now these faces are stored as JPEG images in online Flickr accounts—as the leg of material technology moves off the foundation of paper-chemical

emulsions and unto digital optics and codecs. Similarly, videogames are now moving through social network platforms such as *Facebook*, as it once moved through (to historicize) oscilloscopes, mechanical midways, home computers, consoles, and smart phones. And video once traversed history upon giant, analog legs, but more recently, this have splintered into many spidery, digital legs.

“Video” comes from the Latin *videre*, meaning, “to see.” Where does the medium start and end? History is riddled with moving picture gadgets. Not one, but an array of material technologies evoke “video,” in terms of its human sensations and cultural conventions. The zoetrope, considered a modern invention, appeared as a spinning lantern in 3rd century China. Its inventor, Ting Huan, called the device, “The Pipe Which Makes Fantasies Appear.”<sup>32</sup> In a way, Huan’s animated and self-illuminated screen seems closer to video than film, because the latter illuminates screens via reflected light. Watching video, you look at the magic and at the source of the magic, but with film, the source emanates from behind you, leaving you only with the magic. If we allow the genealogy of video to appear blurry, we may sense a general shape of it, rather than sink into visual-anal schemas and a technical taxonomy to tightly contain it. Let’s allow this lumbering, alien figure of video to smear in our minds, and haunt our notions of the medium for a few minutes.

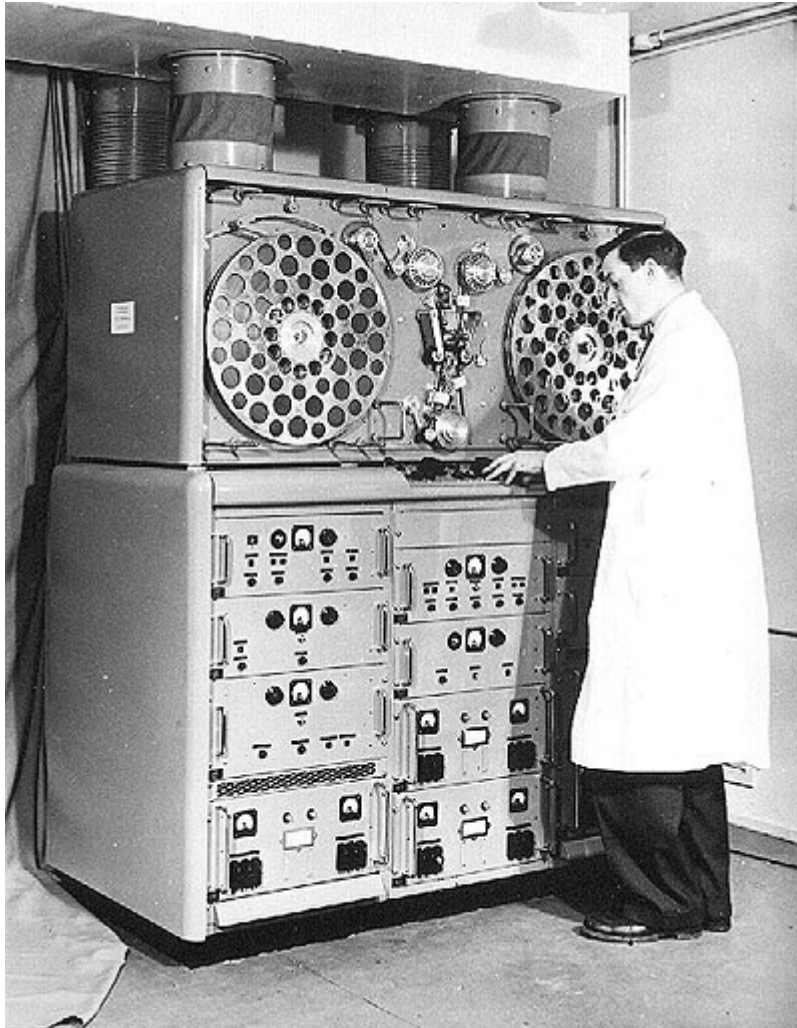


Figure 7-10 An engineer at the BBC operates a videotape machine in 1958 using specialized knowledge and expertise to make it record and play properly.

In technical terms, John Baird transmitted the first “video” signal from one room to another in 1926, and in 1928 sent the first transatlantic transmission from London to New York. Until the invention of Sony’s portapak in 1967, the creation, editing, and airing, of video was constricted to scientists and engineers, the media industry, militaries, and governments. Non-specialists (in terms of technical training and expertise in video) began playing and experimenting with the new medium in the 1960s. The first wave was tinkering artists and a few wealthy prosumers, and of course, a tsunami of pornographers. The favored story about the twin birth of

consumer video and video art, centers on fluxus artist, Nam June Paik. Paik recorded twenty minutes of Pope Paul VI's motorcade in New York on October 4th, 1965 (it was the first visit of a reigning Pope to U.S.). Using a portapak, Paik videotaped the Pope from a moving taxi. That evening, Paik showed it to an enthralled audience at Cafe a Go Go in Greenwich Village. The story requires Paik to have gotten hold of a prototype before Sony officially released the portapak in 1967, which is what Shigeko Kubota, Paik's wife, has claimed. To complicate the genesis myth further, is the fact that Andy Warhol was also casually shooting video and screening it in 1965. The cumulative fuzziness of competing details of the genesis myth eloquently captures the human desire to spread a medium into new lively hands, eyeballs, and uses.





Figure 7-11 *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–1979), by Dara Birnbaum, looped appropriated shots from the TV show to comically jar television’s established conventions out of the usual viewership routines.

Video artists in the 1960s and 70s explored the medium in every direction, manner, and pattern, they could imagine. Discoveries were intentional as well as playfully unintentional and exploratory, as people stretched and broke the medium to see what it could do. Dara Birnbaum remixed television footage of *Wonder Woman* in a way that played with popular television conventions, such as the necessary, formulaic events viewers expected to happen every episode: Lynda Carter’s iconic spinning transformation, her wristband deflection of bullets, and Carter gingerly trotting in and out of the frame to titillate the male gaze. In contrast to Birnbaum, Nam June Paik got sculptural. Paik deconstructed and reconstructed video as a hardware technology as well. Paik set up little Buddha statues to watch themselves

on closed circuit TV in art galleries. Paik is most well-known for piling up hulking assemblages of television sets emanating morphing and colorful electromagnetic smears, wobbling commercials, talking heads of politicians, in a way that foregrounds how video is more malleable than we realize, in terms of its electric signal, optics, messaging, interpretability, and so on.

If we bracket out video art, and only think about commercial television on flat screens and box sets, what do we see? A droning alien bunkered down in our homes. A glass-faced box dominates the living room. We know the drill: television supposedly stupefies us into “couch potatoes” and a sedentary consumer culture. In 1976, Rosalind Krauss described video as a medium of narcissism: television ensnares us as if we were reflective screens whose sole function was to catch its showering light. Caught in a cultural tractor beam, we feel active and animated, but are immobilized by the spectacle. Eventually, the TV receded into the background of home life, serving as a buzzing lightshow that remains on while we eat, clean, surf the web, and attend to our routines. We got distracted from its content, so they added laugh tracks to shows, but we really just wanted to feel plugged into the pulse of technoculture. A diffuse field of weak bonds in the 80s and 90s replaced the singular strong bond epitomizing 50s and 60s television viewership.



Figure 7-12 The MTV series, *Liquid Television*, accentuated the liquid nature of video to make it more consumable for audiences desiring a buzzing flow as much as content.

Video artists in the 1960s explored the growing liquidity of postmodern culture itself, creating our popular future as they critiqued its present. From the 60s to the 90s (rise of consumer video) the television industry seemed hegemonic in its cultural power over video, from the music video to the family sitcom. All the crazy stuff artists were doing in the 60s and 70s became commercial fodder in the 80s and 90s. *Liquid Television* was an Emmy Award winning series on MTV in the 1990s that launched *Beavis and Butt-head* and *Æon Flux*. Television as video, as a medium, did not seem to art critics at the time to be anything near a “liquefying” medium as I have described, but a homogenized, self-similar, and industry-controlled commercial product. But its power was slowly breaking apart due to a convergence

of corporate and artistic energies. It was extremely liquid to artists, critics, and gallery-going elite continuing into the 80s and 90s. But it was still much less liquid to the corporate entertainment industry that “supplied” formulaic entertainment and public who “demanded” it.

Krauss’s critique needs to be rethought if we are to bring it into the present. In the 80s, we shifted away from television as a tractor beam of family-room narcissism, into television as light and noise show, whose weakened tractor beam we can seamlessly waver into and out of at our leisure. Since the rise of consumer video in the 90s, video culture has increasingly shifted into what we might call, *participatory narcissism*, to extend Krauss’s term. Video is increasingly downloadable, streamable, editable, and re-distributable. It’s increasingly accessible and recordable via smart phones. Video chat is on the rise in telephony. Looking backwards, we can chart a path for video that Krauss couldn’t see in 1976. Since the 1960s, a concert of technological, economic, and cultural forces, have been liquefying video: the boom of home movies and the VCR in the 70s and 80s; the cheapening and shrinking of video recording devices into phones in recent decades; the streaming of video online (facilitated by larger bandwidths and faster processors); vast mountains of pirated television and film content available online to remix; easy-to-use consumer editing software. The rise of computational literacy as the lowest common denominator has affected public perception of just what exactly video is, what it is capable of, and what it can be used for.



Figure 7-13 *The Onion* references historical avant-garde video as it remixes an Obama speech.

In convergence culture, every video, *every frame of video*, from a president's speech, to camera-guided missile footage, to a YouTube confessional, to a Japanese beef commercial, are viewed as constructed artifacts. Just as 4chan generates popular memes based on image manipulation, communities like YouTube Poop and YTMND use video or moving images toward similar ends. Repetition or time-scrubbing short, appropriated video clips back-and-forth, is common practice to extract humorous potential. This is strikingly similar to a tactic of the historical video avant-garde, such as Birnbaum's treatment of the *Wonder Woman* television show. Due to the liquid state of video today, every video we see, regardless of the intent, can appear as a house of cards; we touch it and it falls apart, but that's cool, we'll just mix it back up into something new. With a tiny tweak any video is easily bent into hearty hilarity, tragic drama, erotica, incisive critique, utter absurdity, and so on. People are gaining the formal sensibility of the historical video avant-garde,

even if they are ignorant of the history. In the popular consciousness video is becoming a *material*, like paint pigment and paper or pencil lead, begging to be experimented with, remixed for humor, tinkering curiosity, self-expression or critique, just as easy as it can be shot and watched straight.

Video as a medium is dissolving into finer granularities with greater structural variance and recombinatory possibilities. Video is less of a “closed circuit” as Krauss described, and has expanded out of the living room to incorporate technoculture, becoming a “closed network,” albeit a massive one that permeates technoculture. Popular culture blends the participatory with the narcissistic in video. Participation is fractious, congealing around communities of shared life experiences, demographics, and interests. We plug into those networks that reflect the worlds we know or would like to inhabit. However, there is a single underlying current, a liquefying pull that causes continual crossover. Shows on Fox News: *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The Special Report*, slip in clips from *The Daily Show* or *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and vice versa, clips that were themselves remixed to make politicians appear idiotic or dramatic. A swarm of cultural activity leeching in from all directions churns the video medium like the ocean grinding a seabed.

What we are witnessing today with video began a half-century ago in the hands of avant-garde artists. They weren't technologists or scientists, but a “specialist” community of artists. The avant-garde presaged the future of the medium's form. Today's remix videos made by anyone with a computer and minimal technical knowledge, resemble what only a handful of artists like Dara Birnbaum, Vito Acconci, Nam June Paik, and so on, were 1) capable of making and 2) interested in doing in the 1960s and 70s. Purists mistakenly see this as some sort of betrayal by, or co-option of, the avant-garde. Avant-garde techniques, such as



jump-cut editing, collage, etc., are increasingly common cultural conventions, and this is what Brecht and Boal have actually advocated: a loose and hungry way of engaging and participating in popular media. Stepping into the flow and unworking it, rendering it less mystifying (in terms of the process of its creation) and hypnagogic, and more accidental, participatory, and mundane. The avant-garde exists to open up, unwork, and transform culture. It doesn't only exist to protest it from a safe, critical distance. It enables people to get their hands dirty in the mixed strains of complicity and resistance, by fingering through eclectic streams of entertainment. It helps liquefy mediums, and sometimes, the culture industry is a kind of co-liquefier. This accidental alliance is only problematic for disconnected idealists. This is what many avant-garde figures have been advocating all along.



Figure 7-14 Vito Acconci's 1970s video art prefigured today's the many thousands YouTube confessionals, in its self-absorbed exhibitionism and rambling speech.

The video avant-garde in the 1960s and 70s made video about the medium of video, exploring what it was and what it could do. It was formally narcissistic even as it wove popular culture into its blended signals. The historical video avant-garde drew on the sophistications of art practice and history to inform their work. This specialized knowledge is not usually invoked in contemporary video practice. But, art historical awareness is no longer necessary because avant-garde tactics have long-since bled out into popular culture itself. Millions of people participate globally in the liquefaction of video. The ubiquity of avant-garde conventions in the public repertoire has added many kinds of blades in the granularizing process: confessionals, reality TV, candid video, crappily shot phone videos, etc. More important, is the sheer number of people just messing with video. This has an immense, cumulative effect—it is an avant-garde of quantity if not of “great works” that promise earth-stopping quality.

Once the cultural power of participatory narcissism takes hold within a medium, the effects are irreparable as the medium’s conventional forms are unthreaded and spread out. The medium becomes a way to see an endless reflection of the familiar and the self. Collectively, we see glimpses of ourselves in the mirror and constantly scramble to get a better look. It’s irresistible to constantly reach back into the mirror, tilting and adjusting it, in attempts to find that tweak of an angle to better gaze at our mesmerizing culture. The old meanings and traditional cultural functions of the medium as entertainment remain visible and viable, but now they share space with a new repertoire of popular conventional uses. They share semiotic authority. We can understand liquefied mediums as they operated historically, when they were matter-of-factly presented (an old episode of *Leave it to Beaver* appears to us as misogynist, quaint, etc., but it is still also a coherent story), but old



conventions now layered underneath, and are haunted by, an onionskin of other cultural frames. The medium spreads out as we reach into it. What has happened to video in the past few decades, what happened to drawing millennia ago, could happen to videogames

## **Liquefying Videogames**

How would a liquefied videogame medium function, feel, and play like? How would it be distributed? How would people easily tweak games already made? How would players slap videogames together from scratch and from scraps gathered from the internet? How would we rapidly engage and disengage the medium to casually communicate as we do other liquefied mediums such as photography, drawing, video, dance, music, etc.? The reverse question is much easier to grasp. What freezing, solidifying forces are technically thwarting the liquefaction of videogames: DRMs, lack of source code, network access, console specificity? In terms of technology, contemporary video, images, and music, are more computer agnostic, because they are designed that way. What of the mass supply and demand for flow in games? Could participatory narcissism break apart and liquidate our staunch desire for videogame to flow? How could conceiving, making, distributing, playing, and remixing videogames become as easy and obvious as doing the same with video, such as making YouTube poop, for the average participant of technoculture?

Just as video artists of the 60s and 70s presaged the popular, liquefied form of the video medium today, contemporary videogame artists presage the future of videogames. What the growing number of videogame artists, modders, and hackers, are doing today are flares shot into the medium's future. In retrospect, this

dissertation was a kind of tour, illuminating what the popular videogame form could become in the coming decades as the diverse field of avant-garde figures spreads it out. The avant-garde sets up limit-cases by which we can measure our popular progress. The works I have surveyed are mostly marginal and unknown to popular culture, so how and why would they be mass replicated? How would avant-garde tactics spread out through popular culture until the videogame medium is liquidated into a lake of Legos? How can participatory narcissism crack and dissolve the solid walls of the flow channel so videogames may leak out beyond flow?

The beginning of an answer lies in Gonzalo Frasca's thesis, "Videogames of the Oppressed," in which he develops and applies Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed" to videogames. Frasca explores how players could reconfigure videogames on the level of computer code in order to empower and transform themselves, and communities, by using the medium socially, and fundamentally sharing power over your own experiences of it. Boal called his new convention of combining spectator and actors, *spectactors*. Frasca does not coin a new term himself, but if we give ourselves some creative slack and consider Frasca's formal fetish for seeing games as simulations, coded procedures we can think of something that may root his theory within the narrative political avant-garde episteme. A player given the opportunity to program, and reprogram, a game as she plays it, could be called a *playgrammer*, a player plus programmer. Frasca sees the core affordance of videogames as reprogrammable simulations and suggests the following praxis along this conviction: 1) A person faces an oppressive situation in her life. 2) She simulates it in a videogame she codes from scratch or mods an existing game. 3) Another person plays the game and changes the code in response. 4) The first playgrammer replays the modified game to engage her problem from a new perspective. 5) Rinse

and repeat. Unlike Boal, Frasca has not actually put this into practice. Therefore, it is valuable to consider how Frasca envisions a specific application of his theory. Frasca uses Boal as launching point:

Instead of performing on stage, participants would discuss real life situations by creating videogames and then modifying them in order to reflect their personal points of view. [...] For example, let's imagine that the protagonist's problem is that he is being bullied at school and he doesn't know how to deal with this. In order to simulate his problem, he could use a *Pac-Man* template and modify the original game. He would replace the Pac-Man with a cartoon version of himself and replace the ghosts with images of his harassers. In addition to this, he could also take away the score feature and the pills, leaving nothing behind but a labyrinth where he is being constantly chased. Once that game is posted online, the other members of the group could respond by creating variants. One of them could be to modify the structure of the labyrinth to create a small space where the protagonist could live isolated, safe from the bullies. But other players could say that this means giving up his freedom and, therefore, that it is not a good solution. Then, another player could suggest introducing weapons on the environment. [...] Again, the goal of these games is not to find appropriate solutions, but rather serve to trigger discussions.<sup>33</sup>

Frasca's vision is sound but doesn't seem very practical. Wouldn't it be much easier for the "protagonist" to post a thread in an online forum soliciting advice, or to chat with close family or friends about the problem? To enable illiterate South Americans to use theater, Boal empowers them to use their bodies as a medium to improvise and model their domestically or publically oppressive situations. There is a salient

connection between teaching people how to sharpen and wield the presence and force of their physical bodies to become more powerful political subjects, just recall, for example, the embodied theatrics of the original Black Panthers. In Frasca's imaginary scenario, there is a series of disconnects between the social matrix of how, why, and where the bullying occurs, at school, and the proposed way he says it could be modeled, discussed, remixed, and debated, within the rules of a videogame.

Frasca's adherence to ludology marks a critical weakness in his vision. As a ludologist, Frasca sees procedural rules as the all-powerful convention of videogames: it is in rules, logics, and mechanics, that videogames really show their stuff. What Frasca fails to realize that, even in his formal view, a "videogames of the oppressed" shouldn't focus primarily on parsing rules, but on their addition, subtraction, and transformation—that is where the liquid power remains locked up. It's not in establishing rules, or even in reflecting about the meaning (intended or unintended) of rules, but the force lies in blurring the givenness and authority of a game's rules. Building on Frasca's own vision, the transformative agency seems to lie in playing hard with rules themselves. How are the rules transformed? How many ways are available to transform them? Such questions are not fully examined in Frasca's vision and thesis, although it should be the most important question from a ludologist's point of view. He provides specific examples, such as modifying skins in *The Sims*. Frasca mentions using "templates," for example, "if a player wants to create a game involving fighting, she could use the Street Fighter template. If the simulation involves somebody running away, a racing car template might do it, as long as she replaces the car graphics with images of persons." Frasca method is mechanistic and overlooks affordances that are artistic, creative, communal, and experimental. Players should be empowered to constantly reach beyond the flow to

affect the game on a meta-level. Authoring and editing rules should be as obvious as editing a U.S. President's video address into hilarity, critical irony, or a soupy mess of sensation. Beyond ludology, the bigger problem lies in figuring out how Frasca's envisioned practice could breach and infect videogames as popular entertainment. How can videogames seem, feel, and play as liquid? How can the infrastructure and walls of the flow channel get caught up in transformative play, readily and accidentally?

Boal claimed that theater has an advantage as an avant-garde medium because it is ancient, intimate, and familiar to every culture. Theater is bodily intuitive to individuals, via a life experience of using and parsing body language, being sexual creatures, and so on. All a spectator needs is her will to participate. Boal teaches the easiest thing in the world: how to tap out an actor friend, and take her place in the rewound narrative. What is the equivalent transfer of authority in videogames, as tapping-out a neighbor, and rewinding the theatrical drama live? Furthermore, if a player wishes to be a *playgrammer*, she is only empowered to the degree of her creativity, literacy, and skill in game design and programming, and her ability to create, modify, or download visual content, sounds and music.

For technologists and ludologists, the key is procedurality. There's a lively academic movement that is pushing for procedural literacy or digital literacy as a vital knowledge and skill that should be taught in primary and secondary schools. They see procedurality as equal to the big three: reading, writing, and arithmetic; or equal to: relating, representing, and reasoning, which has replaced the first big three in many circles. Seymour Papert famously described how children could learn to program using Logo in his 1980 book, *Mindstorms*. In 1974, Ted Nelson cried that "you can and must understand computers NOW," in *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*.

Since the early 80s, there's been a flurry of similar pleas, which should be understood as a cry for the *mass liquefaction of computational media*. The problem is that cries are primarily technical (rather than social or personal), advocating for proficiency in the logics of programming. B.A. Sheil, for example, limits his pedagogy to students learning what programming is across platforms, programming in the logical abstract (and not the social abstract, etc.): "Traditional methods of instruction in terms of surface characteristics of the programming task, such as specific computers and programming languages, are gradually yielding to less media dependent treatment of programming as a problem of structured design." Beyond this dominant drive toward technicity, the call for procedural literacy is otherwise warped as an extension of *digital warfare*, famously articulated by Reagan, or of the new economy of *digital capitalism*, as advocated by Newt Gingrich.

Procedural literacy should not only be framed in terms that are technical, logical, conceptual, militaristic, or economic. Procedural literacy, to build upon Brecht and Boal, is a means of becoming a self-determining community; it is a means to gain traction for collective and individual agency in contemporary technoculture. To couch a popular pedagogy of videogames in an essentialist theory of procedural literacy is problematic because it only adheres to the metrics that formalist and ludologist theory have set forth. Videogames, as a medium, are also determined by complicit formalists, narrative folk, and many other groups not mentioned here. Therefore, like the avant-garde itself, a comprehensive pedagogy of videogames must recognize a wide field of activity that has uncomfortably divergent metrics and internally opposed ideals. It's only because the digital literacy, or procedural literacy, movement already has flourishing roots in academia, that we may piggyback on them. It's an opening to infect people with the idea that videogames

are a diverse medium to be considered as many different things by many different kinds of people—which might happen if the proceduralists get games in classrooms as a means to teach 21st century literacy.



Figure 7-15 The *Alice Project* is a 3D programming environment crafted for girls to feel able and interested in making videogames and machinima.

Initiatives at major universities are wedding procedural literacy with personal and collective agency by using the social-narrative power of videogames. This was the goal of the *Alice Project* at Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center. *Alice* is a drag-and-drop programming language and integrated 3D development environment. It's crafted to inspire and teach middle-school girls how to program through the appeal of shared storytelling and the fungibility of

procedural play. The *Scratch* project, developed by Mitchel Resnick at MIT, is a similar endeavor. Advertised as, “*Scratch*: a programming language for everyone. Create interactive stories, games, music and art.” *Scratch* is limited to 2D graphics yet is more liquid than *Alice* in a critical way. *Scratch* allows code to be altered and manipulated at runtime. This provides a clue how the easy, intuitive “tap-out” in Boalian theater may be transliterated into games. If players can alter the rules of a game during runtime, it can reframe the larger structure of the videogame medium in their mind. That taste of freedom will be planted. Perhaps the demand for similar freedoms will spread. Videogames might seem like they should be more accessible, open, and malleable in other moments as well. It might be more commonsensical that players should be able to fundamentally engage and restructure any videogame at any time. Galloway and Thacker have argued, “freedom can’t be hardwired,” but it can be culturally “softwired” through a shift in perspective. *Alice*, *Scratch*, and similar efforts provide the necessary scaffolding to teach us how videogames function—but they do so that we may restructure and share our forces and presence, through the medium as if it were liquid to fold, remix, and pour into new molds.

The size of the group that plays videogames dwarfs the group that creates them. Like the birth of every medium, videogames are presently a one-to-many medium (as drawing was once the privy of shamans, and video, of engineers and scientists). This trend is slowly shifting, due to the accidental collaboration of the avant-garde, gaming communities, and the market. There are a number of online communities in which members create and upload videogames, including TIGSource.com and Kongregate.com, described by its founder as “videogames meets YouTube.” Other web portals are going one step further by allowing people to play user-submitted games, but also download and modify these games, and re-upload the new remixed works. Corporations are increasingly complicit with avant-



garde values in this arena. The forces of corporate capitalism are, in some ways, assisting the narrative political avant-garde in blending the medium into a consumer pulp to shape.

Players have created and shared game content since the early 1990s, but not game mechanics, and not whole videogames, as is possible via *Alice*, *Scratch*, or *Little Big Planet*. Will Wright accounted for the desire to share content such as clothes, character skins, in the *Sims Online* and was hoping to expand the viral community-building hook as players shared creatures in *Spore*:

when somebody makes a piece of content, they are so much more emotionally attached to it [and are] totally interested in what happens to it. [...] players love trading and sharing and spreading this stuff around and having it come to them, and building up their worlds. [...] we can distribute that to all the other players, then the players in some sense become part of the game-design team. They are helping us to build the game. I'm trying to figure out, how do we take that cool dynamic and burn it into the game to where it's part of the game's DNA, as opposed to something we taped on later?<sup>34</sup>

The major drive toward distributing a little more power to players is economic. It is prohibitively expensive to task trained artists to populate current and next generation of games with handcrafted content that takes advantage of the high-resolution affordances of the new graphics engines. Procedural generation of models and quests has been offered as one solution, but thousands, if not millions, of players are still a more creative engine, in this regard. Will Wright has suggested an across-the-board solution to the "content problem" that each new phase of hardware presents. Wright calls it the "XML-ization" of game content. In a nutshell, it means

content could be pushed across games. Avatars, monsters, architectures, sound effects, music, dialogue, visual effects, and so on, would all be mixable and cross-compatible among game engines and hardware.

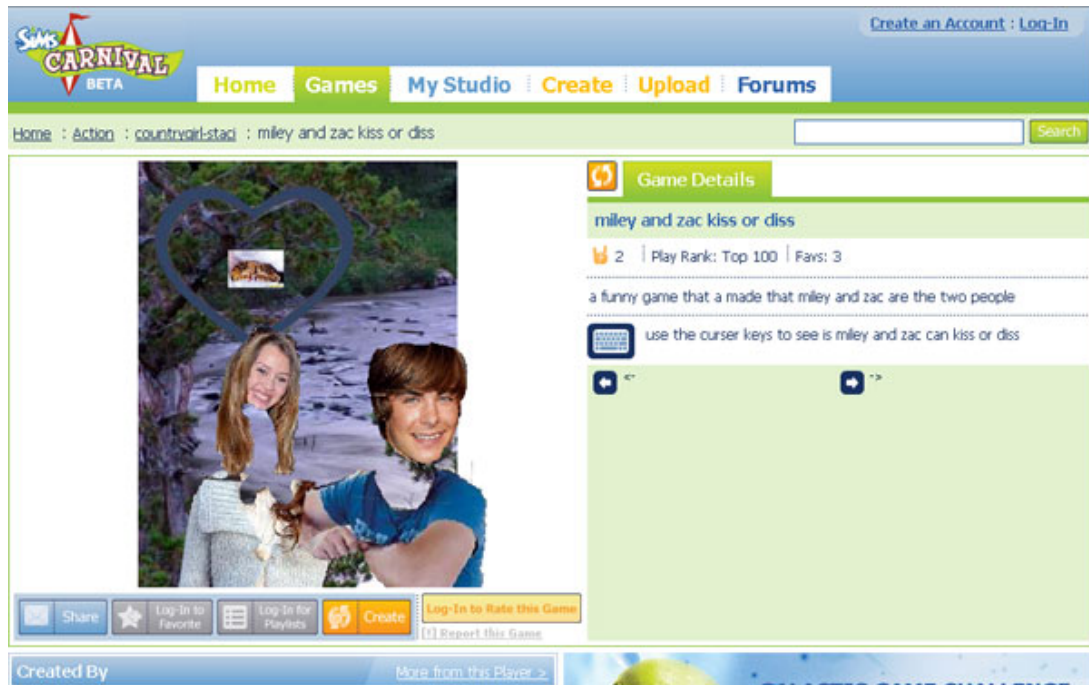


Figure 7-16 *The Sims Carnival* enables players to create, remix and distribute videogames.

Frasca has noted with anticipation *The Sims Carnival* by Electronic Arts, the world's largest game developer. According to Frasca, game critics should welcome this EA project as a philanthropic gesture. It is a videogame development platform made especially for novice programmers, a first world, and economically privileged analogue, to a barrio practicing the Theater of the Oppressed. The "Game Creator" component of *The Sims Carnival* is an easy-to-learn application allowing the playgrammer to choose the level of depth at which she wished to engage the code. Those unfamiliar with programming can invoke a help wizard in order to select a genre, add or remove items/effects associated with that genre, and publish the game to the website.

Game industry support of community-building through videogames may make radical political hardliners uneasy. But for the narrative political avant-garde this isn't the case. They have historically either been embedded in the mainstream (such as Brecht), or, at least, willing to seize upon mainstream conventions from populist appeals (such as Boal). *The Sims Carnival*, *Little Big Planet*, and so on, spread out the power to rework videogames in complementary ways to *Scratch* and *Alice*. The more diverse and comprehensive access players have into the medium, coupled with their ability to program it, will determine what new cultural applications will arise. The question is then: in what ways is corporate capitalism freezing up the medium? These are where the narrative political avant-garde must drill into and operate on.

Bertolt Brecht lamented, "pity the nation that needs heroes."<sup>35</sup> Brecht was acutely aware of a dilemma that the avant-garde faced. The avant-garde may have aided in partially liquidating the Aristotelian "protagonist" in fiction, but had the role only shifted to the "hero" of the avant-garde artist? At the 2008 Game Developer's Conference, Rod Humble, head of Sims Studio at EA, gave a lecture entitled, "The Emergent Gamer." Humble made a humorous prediction, "Professional game design is an anomaly. Enjoy your jobs while you can... before the people take over!"<sup>36</sup> Between Brecht's apprehension and Humble's self-effacing optimism stands Frasca, awkwardly in the middle. Frasca provides an interesting caveat to the liquefaction of videogames. Frasca has suggested that for a Videogames of the Oppressed to fully emerge, it needs many amateur auteurs, but also "the top-down approach is also needed." It needs visionary creators who work independently of the game industry. A narrative political avant-garde will not become an emerging social force "until major games are developed by biased

authors that understand that fun is not the only thing that can be conveyed through this medium.”<sup>37</sup> To influence and inspire masses of players into becoming creators of games, they need iconic artists arising from within a “middle-ground” between the average player and professional game producer. To invoke Brecht, we should pity a videogame community that needs an avant-garde to crack open the possibility space. In 1965 Jean-Luc Godard wrote, “I await the end of Cinema with optimism.” Alexander Galloway, a supporter of the videogame avant-garde writes that the “movement should aspire to a similar goal, redefining play itself and thereby realizing its true potential as a political and cultural avant-garde.”<sup>38</sup> Galloway ends his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, echoing Godard, as awaiting the end of the videogame avant-garde. If the narrative political avant-garde succeeds, the radical political game avant-garde would become obsolete. What they are doing would become obvious—breaking and remixing all and every videogame convention would become normal and conventional, just as it is now obvious and conventional in the communally liquefied mediums of drawing or video.

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## CONCLUSION

The videogame avant-garde is not working towards an ideal, but unworking the present state of gamer culture. It lives in alterity. The videogame avant-garde diverges from today's technocultural entertainment in many kinds of ways, just as it diverged from art historically in various ways. For an avant-garde to be contemporary and relevant, it must be incredibly varied to work through the videogame field. It would have to be modern as well as postmodern. To examine this avant-garde, you would have to allow categories to rise and fall as the theory moved through the territory. With this in mind, the videogame avant-garde has been presented as a spread out field to afford a diversity of approaches. After applying Latour's concept of the nonmodern in the introduction, I advanced the concept of an "open theory," based on the idea of an "open work," by Umberto Eco. Open theory affords diversity by design, and from the bottom-up. The serial nature of the chapters creates a composite and varied view, spreading out a range of critical roles for us to play. It is open because there are gaps in the logic between chapters. The multiplicity of the videogame avant-garde shouldn't be collapsed into a false, ideal uniformity. The focus and terms of the chapters: formal, political, radical, complicit, and narrative, sketch out a vibrant territory. The purpose is not to delineate or circumscribe it.

Each chapter is a perspective that treats similar forces differently, shaping our experience along opposing kinds of rhetoric. For an autistic-like, zoomed-in and zoned out focus, we have radical formalists, twitching and twisting gamespace as lone Cartesian pilots skating at the edges of human-computer experience. For a zoomed-out and zoned-in focus, we have the swarming multitude, wielding the



bottom-up transformative force of politics. Cutting across the field in along a more lateral trajectory, are the narrative folks blending popular dramatic conventions with form and politics, all so we might unwrite or rewrite reality. Finally, by presenting a collection of events and works in this research, many of which might indeed be “marginal,” hopefully, we should now be more attuned to a broader range of subtlety, and not only able to appreciate grand, explosive, or supposedly “great” examples.

Just as the field of videogame avant-gardes can only be appreciated from many roles and epistemologies, the field of videogames beyond the avant-garde is even more kaleidoscopic. People who are entirely complicit with the mainstream, but who wish videogames to do something different in terms of market share, or Hollywood dramatics, run counter to many avant-gardes. However, they are also like the avant-garde in their desire to manifest alterities in games. To appreciate what thatgamecompany, Anna Anthropy, Sheri Graner Ray, or even Roger Ebert and Steven Spielberg, wish to achieve in mainstream videogames does not preclude us from critiquing and unworking mainstream games at the same time. This is the value and purpose of open theory. Just as open theory allows us to appreciate various kinds of avant-gardes, it can help us appreciate mainstream and avant-garde gestures together as well.

The avant-garde needs popular culture and institutional power, because they are unable to clearly advocate for reform. The avant-garde doesn't work straightforwardly for improving the status quo, because they can't work entirely within the system, but open up experience itself, moving along anterior trajectories. This doesn't mean that we players, researchers, critics, and creators, should not work within the system or straightforwardly advocate for reform. We can applaud

Henry Jenkins testifying before congress. We can get venture capital into the hands of women and minority game entrepreneurs. We can fight age restrictions at points of purchase, right alongside corporate interests. One is motivated by freedom of access, and the other profit, but both want the same result. In a world of fractured identities, “enemies” are just as often “allies,” if they are kaleidoscopically seen through various angles simultaneously. As contemporary, nonmodern subjects, we do not have to adhere to monolithic logic. We can absorb internal conflict, comprehend divergent worlds, and bring them each into play. If we are nonmodern, if we can accept an open theory and see through a multiplicity of views, it becomes clear that mainstream currents and avant-garde currents are, in fact, complementary, just like all of the avant-gardes inadvertently complement one another. The scattershot of radical avant-gardes, complicit avant-gardes, and many figures chaotically work together, even if mutually ignorant or in opposition.

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